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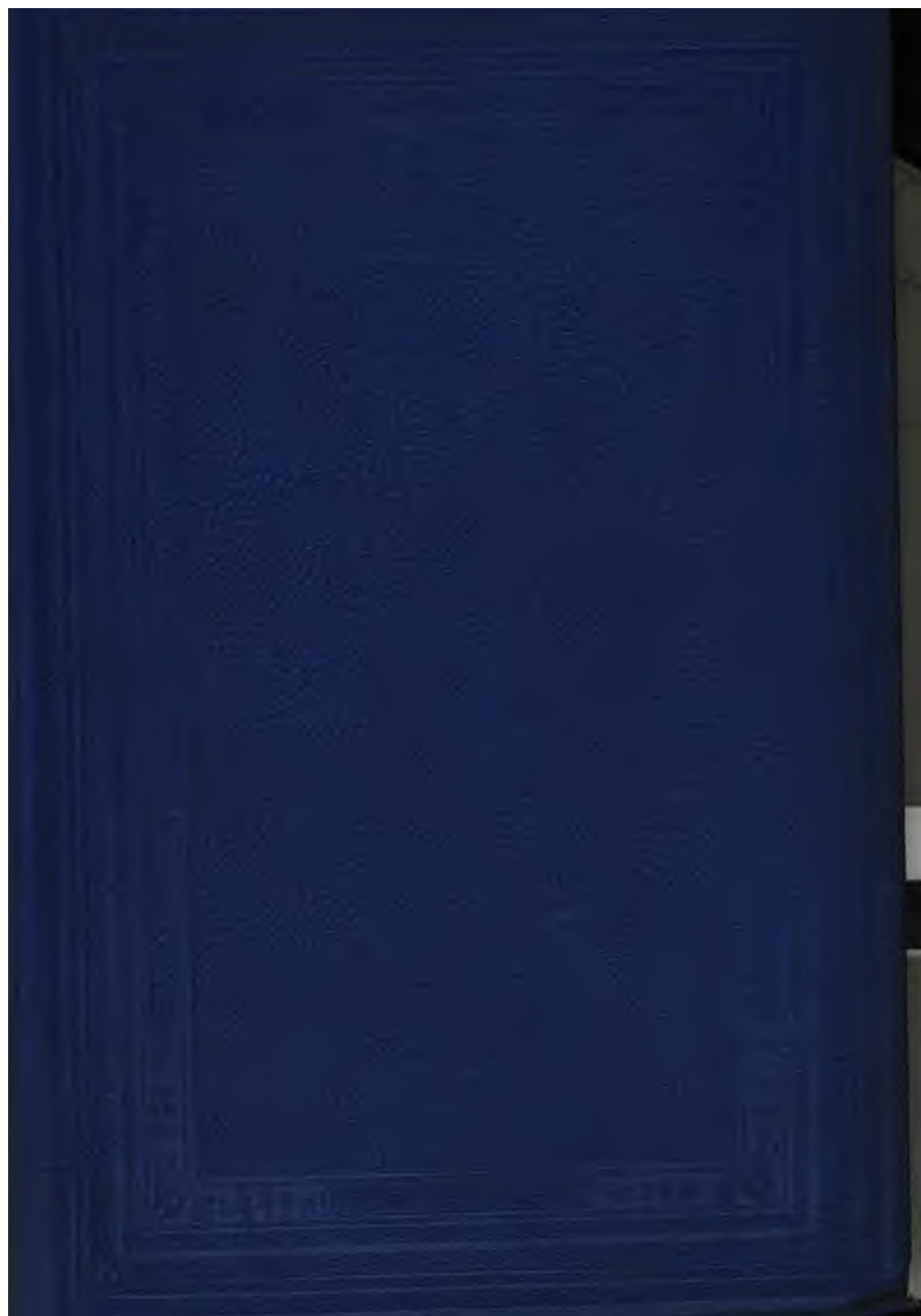
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A WOMAN'S RANSOM.

VOL. II.



A WOMAN'S RANSOM.

BY

FREDERICK WILLIAM ROBINSON,

AUTHOR OF

"GRANDMOTHER'S MONEY," "UNDER THE SPELL,"

"WILDFLOWER," "SLAVES OF THE RING,"

&c., &c.

"Who sows the serpent's teeth, let him not hope
To reap a joyous harvest. Every crime
Has, in the moment of its perpetration,
Its own avenging angel."

SCHILLER.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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CONTENTS

OF

THE SECOND VOLUME.

BOOK III.—CONTINUED.

A STRUGGLE WITH FATE.

CHAPTER	PAGE
VIII. A SECOND LETTER FROM ELLEN . . .	3
IX. LEAVE OF ABSENCE	5
X. DEPARTURE	19

BOOK IV.

RANSOM-MONEY.

I. COMING HOME	33
II. JOSEPH'S SHREWD HEAD	47
III. MY SISTER'S HUSBAND	57
IV. I AM MARRIED	74
V. JANET'S CHOICE	88

BOOK V.

IN THE MISTS.

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. KESWICK VISITORS	99
II. THE OLD BATTLE-GROUND	121
III. NELLIE	143
IV. JOSEPH'S CONFESSION	159
V. MRS. RAY'S HOUSE-WARMING	186
VI. JOSEPH AND LETTY	211
VII. THE WORST OF NEWS	222
VIII. THE FIRST QUARREL	238
IX. JANET	251
X. ILLNESS	259
XI. A WINDING-SHEET IN THE CANDLE	278
XII. MARY'S SUSPICION	296

BOOK III.

CONTINUED.

STRUGGLE WITH FATE.

“ Have we been tilling, sowing, labouring,
With pain and charge, a long and tedious winter,
And when we see the corn above the ground,
Youthful as is the morn, and the full ear,
That promises to stuff our precious garners,
Shall we then let it rot, and never reap it ?”

BEAUMONT AND FLETCHER.

“ I am two fools, I know,
For loving and for saying so.”

DONNE.

A WOMAN'S RANSOM.

CHAPTER VIII.

A SECOND LETTER FROM ELLEN.

“ Immediate.

“ December 16th, 18—

“ MY DEAR, PATIENT CANUTE,—Ever the most patient and the most kind; seeking no opportunity to pierce the mystery in which I had enshrouded myself, but waiting for my own signal to raise the curtain between us and the one secret that I have ever had from you.

“ Well, the time has come, dear, and the truth comes with it. I was married last October. It had been a long and fitful engagement, depending upon the will of others so much for its sequence in

a happy marriage, that I have preferred, and have been advised to vex no one with my love troubles, or my happy but secret marriage which ended them until this time. How the courtship began, and who began it, I will tell you when we meet—it is too long a story for the limits of a *hurrygraph* like this. I write in haste to ask you to obtain leave of absence at once—to come to London, and talk with me and my husband about the dear mother whom it will be so hard to leave. Come at once, I beg of you. There is a surprise awaiting you here.

“Ever your affectionate sister,

“NELLIE GEAR.”

CHAPTER IX.

LEAVE OF ABSENCE.

THERE was much to perplex me in Ellen's letter—it implied good news—it spoke of much happiness having fallen to her share, and yet, as if despite the writer's intention, there was a mournful cadence in it which rang out and set me thinking deeply of the happy marriage to which she had alluded. Was it only the natural confusion of confessing to the great change, or sorrow at parting with the mother, or doubt of the future which she might have rashly chosen for herself.

Naturally impatient of control, regretful at her own hard fate, the weary round of teaching day after day in a family singularly devoid of gentle-

ness and courtesy, had she, with her characteristic impulse, accepted the first offer which she thought might raise her from the dead level of her monotonous existence? Had she already grown worldly, and thought but of bettering herself, as the phrase runs, or was it a love-match after all?

Mary Zitman and I took council together over that letter. My troubles, my confidences, were hers now—ours was a love without an alloy to it—it was at least utterly devoid of selfishness.

"You must go at once, Canute," she said, sadly.

"We were only talking of my departure yesterday, Mary," I said; "it is but a day or two before the time."

"A day or two stolen from the first real happiness I have known, are of value to me, Canute."

"Consider it a day or two nearer to the happiness of possessing one home together, dearest," I replied.

She blushed at this, and her hands involuntarily pressed the arm on which they were clasped. We were wandering in the lanes together that morning; the fine weather still continued—spring seemed to have come before its time in the green valley—the birds were singing once more—

Nettlewood, to our romantic fancies, had become Arcadia.

In the council together on our special love affairs, we had resolved to marry at once; I had pressed the question, and it had been a woman's natural reserve rather than her wish that demurred to it. Our positions were too distinct and separate, whilst she remained the heiress and I the dependant—there were so many things to stand between us and our marriage, if we lingered on the threshold of our fair estate. Mary Zitzman feared the barriers in her way, and in her heart was anxious to surmount them, and feel my strong arm at her side protecting her. She avowed it at last; she feared her brother's return—feared even the firmness of my own resolves that could choose her for herself alone.

“I have never known independence, Mary, and shall not miss all that riches can procure me. But you who have been accustomed to every luxury in life, what will you say and think of the poor home I can only offer you?”

“I will say it is home, blest by all the home-angels that will hover round us, dear.”

“Well, then, I will try and find Doctors' Commons, Mary, and bring back the wedding license.”

"Or never come back to me again, and leave me to die of despair in Nettlewood Vale!"

"Is that likely?"

So it was arranged that I should depart that very evening on my journey. Mrs. Zitman was anxious to place her carriage, or at least a saddle-horse at my disposal; but I was reluctant to accept the favour even from her. I had scarcely a right to avail myself of the resources of her establishment, or to parade to the small world of Nettlewood our intimate relationship. I engaged from Henlock one of those bumping, springless machines which rattle their way over every mountain road, and seldom come to grief under the process. This car I arranged to meet me on the other side of the Ferry at six in the evening—its driver calculating that by ten or eleven at night we should work our way to Borrowdale and Keswick. From Keswick, in the morning, it would be easy to push on to Ambleside and Bowness—I hoped to be in London late on the evening of the following day.

In London to see Ellen's husband, and bid God speed to him and her—to ascertain the reason for keeping me in the dark concerning the marriage—to buy the license for my own wedding—to consider what was best for my mother, whom Mary Zitman was

very anxious to see—to find out Herbert Vaughan, if possible, and startle him, whom Mary was *not* anxious to see, by the determination his sister and I had arrived at—to visit Doctors' Commons also, at Mary's request, and for her sake, not mine, to study carefully the last will and testament of Samuel Zitman, Esq., late of Nettlewood House.

A copy of the will was in Herbert Vaughan's possession, but the cabinet was locked, and Vaughan had ridden to London with the key.

I wished to bid adieu to my betrothed at that time, but she would come to Nettlewood Ferry at six, to say good-bye to me. She had no fear of what the Rays would think—she even had her suspicions that the Rays, by some unforeseen means, had already been startled by the tidings of their coming greatness.

She was right, as I ascertained immediately upon my arrival at the Ferry Inn that afternoon.

I found Mrs. Ray holding by a deal table on the grass plot, where the Nettlewood folk were accustomed to take their ease and their beer in the summer time. She was evidently waiting for me, stirred up by the news that had so quickly drifted to the Ferry Inn. Her face was paler than usual,

the hooked nose more pointed, the greenish grey eyes more full of fire. She stood and clung to the table, and waited impatiently for my approach; in her excitement she had pushed her black cap to the back of her head, where it hung by a high comb like a weeper. The scanty grey hairs were all dishevelled by the wind, and streamed about her shoulders, and were pushed away every instant from her excited face. She had never seemed more wild and witch-like in the whole time of my acquaintance with her.

"Mr.—Mr. Gear," she gasped, as I pushed open the swing wicket, "come here, please. I—I want to speak to you."

"Well—what is it, Mrs. Ray?"

"Is it true that—that—that—that—"

She gulped and choked and fought with one yellow claw in the air before her utterance came back.

"That you're going to marry Mrs. Zitman?"

"Do they talk of this in Nettlewood?"

"Yes—everybody—every—body. For God's sake, say it's true, man!"

"Well, it's true."

The effect of my answer was greater than I had anticipated. She flung her hands aloft, and reeled

away from the table, to be caught by her daughter Letty, who had been watching her from the entry.

"Let—Let—Letty dear," she cried, "it's gospel truth! He owns it! We shall wear silks and satins and gold chains, and keep our carriage, and brave it over all these wretches here, and they'll come to beggary at the great house, thank the Lord! It's what I've allus prayed for—what I've allus dreamed would come to you and me, the lawful heirs to my dead brother's mo—mo—money."

She broke into a passionate fit of weeping and croaking on Letty's shoulder; the face of the daughter, dark and ominous, looked over her at me.

"You do not share in your mother's rejoicing, Letty?" I said.

"No."

"Why not?"

"I see no joy in the change that may be waiting for us. I change places with *her* on whom there has always been misery and affliction—I don't believe in the happiness her money will bring *me*!"

"You're a fool," sobbed the old woman, "you're the worst of all the fools I've—I've ever come across!"

"The money comes too late for me, mother,"

she answered; "I'd sink it at the Ferry, and not give one sigh for its loss."

"You're—you're a baggage—the worst of all the baggages about here. Let me go into the house out of sight of such a daughter."

She wrenched herself away, and tottered into the house. Following her, we found that she had taken possession of the best room.

"This is *my* room, Mr. Gear," she said, "the best of everything belongs to me now!"

"I shall not require it any longer, Mrs. Ray. I leave for London to-day."

"What's that for?" she exclaimed.

"For private reasons of my own."

"To buy the license—" she guessed shrewdly; "ay, that's striking with a will, and like a wise man. Don't forget there's Herbert Vaughan behind you yet to stop it—I know that he is your fate and mine—I said so when he came across the Ferry long ago."

She was suffering very much from nervous excitement. She sat close to the table, drumming her long crooked fingers on its oil-cloth covering, playing imaginary preludes to her coming greatness. A sudden idea stopped her fantasia for an instant.

"Mind there's no agreement atween us—you broke it off and insulted me, an old woman too! There's not a penny on the bargain you broke off with me!"

"Do not be afraid that I shall claim one penny, Mrs. Ray."

"See what a judge of human nature I've turned out!" she said conceitedly. "I read it like a book months and months ago."

"Shall we go now?" asked Letty from the doorway.

"My room!" replied this obstinate old woman; "the best of everything for Martha Ray. Shut up the Ferry Inn, and don't serve another customer. When I come into my property, I'll burn this place, to light me on the road to home!"

"Patience, mother—we are travelling too fast," said Letty sternly, "there is a crowd of accidents to thwart us yet. Mr. Gear is going to London, and may die, or repent, by the way."

"You—you hussy, what made you put that awful thought in my head?" she shrieked.

The thought calmed her somewhat—the chances against the prize appeared to present themselves with more distinctness. She left off her horrible tattoo, and looked piteously across the table at me.

"You'll take care of yourself, young man. It's a long journey, and them railway engines are allus a-busting and smashing."

I could not refrain from a hearty laugh at this change of tone, and she laughed with me, as though "busting and smashing" were rather a pleasant joke than otherwise. She improved in demeanour, too, wonderfully, and rose to leave me in possession of the best room again.

"It's at your service, sir," she said, "I'm ony a little beside myself with the good news. You don't mind the old woman who's been allus like a mother to you."

"Oh! pray don't mention it."

She and her daughter retired—presently to return just as I was offering up my thanks to find myself alone. The old lady was struggling to wrench one arm away from the restraint of her daughter's hand, whilst with the other she clutched to her side a wine bottle covered with sawdust and cobwebs.

"Let me go, Letty—there ain't a thing I do that pleases you. If you ain't more dutiful by-and-bye, I'll make a will that 'll leave you short enough, see if I don't."

She struggled into the room, placed the bottle

on the table, produced from the pocket of her apron three wine glasses.

"I said long ago that when the good news came, I'd drink the last bottle but one of the port my husband laid down thirty years ago. The last bottle of all's for the wedding-day of Mary Zitman. I—I don't mind extravagance when there's money that wont be missed a-coming, and so we'll drink your health and a safe journey to you, sir."

This was at least a kind offer of Mrs. Ray's, and I saw no loophole to escape from it.

"Tain't bad wine for thirty years a'most," she muttered; "when the doctor ordered it for me the winter afore last, I asked him if he'd pay for it as well, for I couldn't. Lord, didn't his fat pig's face turn red at that?"

She sat down to laugh over that little joke of hers, rummaging meanwhile for a corkscrew in her apron's pocket.

"Here, Letty, draw the cork, girl, and look a little less sour over our good luck, or you'll turn the blessed liquor. Now, Mr. Gear, *that's* your glass!"

She sat down, and waited for the drawing of the cork—an operation performed very rapidly by

Letty. The wine was poured forth, and Mrs. Ray raised her glass in the air.

"To Mr. and Mrs. Gear—God send their happy marriage soon!"

"God bless them both!" echoed Letty, seizing the glass suddenly; "they deserve happiness—they have a poor girl's wishes for it."

She drank the wine, and left the room at once. Mrs. Ray stared after her.

"That girl's a-going silly fast. That'll be an uncommon pleasant thing to happen when I get rich. Well," turning to me, "what have you got to say?"

"To thank you for your good wishes—to wish in return," raising my glass, "that you and your daughter may be happy together in the new life that is coming."

"Hum," she said, considering the toast, "I don't exactly see how that's to be. But thank ye, and— and fill your glass again. I'm in a rare liberal humour to-day, I tell you."

I expressed the shortness of time that lay before me prior to my departure as an excuse for further wine-drinking, and abandoned the parlour to Mrs. Ray. In my own room I packed up the few things which I thought might be requisite for my

short stay in town, and found that there was only a quarter of an hour left me to remain in Nettlewood.

It was a dark but starlit night. From my chamber window I could see the shimmer of the stars in the deep black water of the lake. I hurried down stairs, and met Letty at the foot thereof.

"Has Mrs. Zitman arrived?"

"Not yet. Come into the back room here—and leave the best room to my mother. She will not stir, she says."

I followed her into the back room; by the light on the table, over which she bent to trim the guttering candle, I could see that her eyes were red with weeping.

"Well, Letty," I said, "these sudden changes affect us all in different ways, but I had hoped to see you happier."

"Thank you," she added, with a faint smile.

"I prophesied a brighter time would come for you—I believe it will now, more than ever."

"All is very dark beyond," she muttered; "I don't see whence the brightness is to follow. I heard news to-day which, forestalling yours, quenched every ray of light for me!"

Jabez entered at this moment.

“The Ferry boat’s ready, Measter Gear. And here’s the lady from the House and her sarvant, and”—looking back over his shoulder—“Measter Mad Wenford, or I’m dreaming!”

CHAPTER X.

DEPARTURE.

THEY came into the back room of the Ferry Inn —Mrs. Zitman and Mr. Wenford in advance, the gaunt serving-woman bringing up the rear. Very strangely, very moodily, did Wenford look towards me, not taking the trouble to exchange one word of greeting.

Mrs. Zitman sprang to meet me, regardless of appearances. Before the eyes of Nettlewood society what had she to study?

"I am full of evil forebodings again, Canute. I have come to ask you not to go away from me."

"I think there are many reasons for our part-

ing, Mary—we must not let a few fancies hinder it for this once.”

She gave way to me.

“If it must be, then,” she added, with a sigh.

Wenford crossed the room towards the mantel-piece, against which he leaned his tall form, and watched our meeting. The skirt of the long cloak he generally wore trailed in the peat ashes of the fire grate. Janet dropped into a chair by the door, and sat there in a very rigid fashion.

“Mr. Wenford crosses the Ferry to-night, Canute—like yourself, he tells me he has urgent business in London. I have just met him on our way hither.”

“He is aware of our engagement?” I asked.

“Yes—he has been speaking of it. Will you think me deceitful when I tell you for the first time that he has been a suitor for my hand?”

“I have heard it from his own lips,” I answered.

“I believe after his own wild fashion,” she whispered, “that he loved me, and that for a time he felt it hard that I could not teach myself to love him in return. He has been inclined to revive the subject to-night, and upbraid me for the choice

I have made. If he be churlish in his manner towards you, you will make allowance for the cause, dear Canute."

"Surely."

"I think that I have fought my battle of words with him pretty well. He is quite tame to-night."

The clock on the landing-place struck six. Jabez, who had withdrawn upon the arrival of visitors, made his re-appearance.

"I can see the car on the other side of the Ferry, Mr. Gear," said he.

"See to my horse, fellow," growled Wenford; "it crosses with me. I have a long journey to perform."

"All right, sir—it is in the ferry-boat."

"Oh! Canute, do not forget me in the little while you'll be away," Mary Zitman cried, clasping my hands in hers; "remember the lonely home, and my worse loneliness until you come back to cheer my heart, and lighten it. Yours is a valuable life, dear; be careful of it for my sake. If I lose you, I must die!" she cried.

"Is it likely that I shall forget you, dearest? Is it not more likely that your brother may return

here, and in the days before him find time to prejudice you against me, and plead his own case with you."

"I will have no pleading that shuts the door against my future. He has known happiness—I have been ever apart from it."

"Well, it is only warning for warning, Mary. Shall we say good-bye now?"

She raised her face to mine with a child's confidence and love, regardless of the watchers round us. As I kissed her trembling lips, I saw the tears brimming her eyelids at the thought of parting with me. Wenford's heavy foot startled both of us.

"When you are ready, Mr. Gear. The ferry-boat awaits your pleasure."

"I am ready, sir."

I recoiled at the darkling frown in Wenford's face—I remembered on the instant all that he had warned me of. Mrs. Zitman, who had been steadily surveying him, caught at my arm with her clasped hands, and then, the moment afterwards, as though swayed by a new impulse, left me to place her hands in his.

"Good-bye, Mr. Wenford. A fair journey to you—a safe one."

He bowed his head very gravely and stolidly, but made no reply.

"You, Edmund Wenford, who know so much of my early life, can bear me out that it has been a troubled one—that to me there has scarcely fallen one ray of sunlight on my path. We have been friends, sir; will you act the friend once more by journeying with him as *your* friend, siding with him against the evil that may meet him by the way?"

He shrank at this adjuration, and seemed to make an effort to draw his hands from hers. He turned away his face from the full light of her searching eyes.

"I ask you, Mr. Wenford, in good faith—I who am left still to believe that the noble heart of your youth has not been wholly scorched up by passion and hate."

"You believe that still?" he said scornfully, as she let go his hands.

"Yes."

"You ask me to be that man's friend—you!"

"I remain yours, despite all, in the face of all."

"Well—well!"

He strode impatiently out of the room—pre-

sently we heard his whip cracking in the night air.

"If he ride with you, Canute, be on your guard," she said, excitedly; "he never looked more mad than now."

"I do not fear him."

We went out of the room and down the dark passage together—I drew her to my side again, as one with whom it was a trial to part. The door of the best room was open, and Mrs. Ray sat before the fire fast asleep. Her head had sunk forwards on her chest, and one hand still retained the empty wine-glass. The bottle of port wine lay on its side on the oilskin cover, *empty*! In the flush of her good-fortune Mrs. Ray had taken to drinking!

"Don't disturb her," whispered Letty, "if you can go away without her seeing either of you, it will be the better course."

"Good-bye, Letty."

"Good-bye, sir."

After I had shaken hands with her, Letty still continued to accompany us down the sloping roadway to the water's edge. Jabez and his companion were waiting near the ferry-boat. Mr.

Wenford stood in the boat itself, his hand upon the bridle-rein of his horse.

"Write to me every day—twice a day," whispered Mary. "I shall be very anxious till I hear from you again."

"Trust me."

"With my life!"

I pressed her to my side again—we had parted, when a cry from Mrs. Ray arrested our progress. That estimable lady was advancing in frog-like fashion towards us in the darkness.

"Letty, Letty!—has he gone?"

"Silence!" said Letty, fiercely.

"But has he gone!—oh! but has he gone away?"

She passed her daughter, and ran fairly into my arms. By standing my ground well, I avoided a backward tilt into the lake.

"Oh! here you are!—and do'ee take care of yourself, and put something round your throat, or this night air'll grip it—and mind they don't spill you on the mountain roads—and oh! good Lud! take care of yourself in those horrid railway trains! You'll let me know how you are getting on—my own son, who's been such a comfort to me in all

these winter months! What's that wretch Jabez dancing the lantern about for?"

"I'm not a-moving the lantern!" cried the aggrieved Jabez.

"You're a-dancing with it, you know you are—and so's George—look at him! And there's a man with a dancing horse in the ferry-boat, or something's wrong with my poor head to-night."

"Samethin's wrang!" commented Janet.

"Oh! are you there, you half Scotch and half Cumberland Jezebel?" she cried, leaving me to approach her, but intercepted by Letty, who drew her arm within her own; "don't you know your betters when you see 'em?"

"Alwa'."

"Then be 'spectful. Letty, who's that in the boat?"

"Mr. Wenford."

"Going where?"

"To London, I believe."

"With Gear! Oh! my head, my head!—let me think a little about that. Steady, Letty, and don't lean sideways so—going away with Mr. Gear! That means—that means——"

She gave a wild scream that curdled the blood of her auditors.

"*That means murder!* Don't go with him!—you don't know that man like I do—what he would do if Herbert Vaughan set him on to do it! Come back!—come back!"

"You hag!" shouted Wenford from the boat.

"Mrs. Zitman—lady, dear—ask him not to go."

"Mary, good-bye. All this is very childish, and this woman is very drunk. Good-bye."

"Good-bye. God bless you!"

We parted in earnest—I stepped on board the ferry-boat, and Jabez and his man sprung after me, and pushed it away from land. Mrs. Ray continued to shriek after us, till the dark figures on the water's edge grew more indistinct, finally mingled with the darkness of the night, and were lost to my yearning gaze.

The oars plashed in the water—the tall figure by the horse's head stood erect and motionless, looking back also. Presently he leaned forwards, dropped something into the lake, and then resumed his original position, which he maintained till the Black Gap side was reached.

The mountain car was waiting for me—the man extinguished the lantern which had been the

signal of his arrival to the people at the Ferry. I crossed from the boat to the path, and took my seat by the side of the driver.

Mr. Wenford did not move. Jabez fidgeted with the oars, and looked at him. George asked if he should lead the horse out.

"No," he responded, moodily. "Turn back again."

"Back again, sir?"

"Is that order so very difficult to understand, you gaping idiot?"

"Pull back, Jabez."

"Good night, Mr. Wenford," I ventured to say.

I scarcely anticipated an answer. There was a long silence, which he broke at last.

"Good night. When you say your prayers to-night—if you be a pious man—thank God that she turned me from my purpose. The devil and I crossed the Ferry together to-night, Gear."

The boat was pushed away from the landing-place again, and the man in the car applied the whip to his horse. In a few minutes the distance was great between us—a black spot dotted the surface of the lake; the mountains loomed across

the water at me, the shadow of the second range of giant hills darkened the path on which we rattled along to Keswick.

The first act of my life had ended.

END OF BOOK III.

BOOK IV.

RANSOM-MONEY.

“The die is cast, and cast for life.”

COTTON.



CHAPTER I.

COMING HOME.

I ARRIVED at Euston Square late on the evening of the 19th of December.

The London city appeared more full of life and action ; there were more faces in the street that night, more noise of cabs and omnibuses, more flare of gas in London highways. The whirl of life rendered me dizzy—surely Nettleswood was away in a foreign land, and nothing so lonely and weird-like could have existence in a country of which this vortex was the capital? I scarcely seemed to know my way along, at first, or to possess the faculty of steering clear of people whom I met, or of staying the

rattle-rattle of the train, which was still making my temples throb. '

I walked home that night to the little shop in Kennington Road. Although eager to reach home, and late as was the hour, I preferred to walk. I had been cramped by twelve hours' sitting posture in the railway carriage, and it was requisite to stretch my long legs somewhat. Sleeping by intervals in the carriage, I had had strange dreams, which had more than once awakened me with a start and a shout—strange ominous dreams of people athirst for my life, and tracking me like sleuth-hounds; of danger to Mary Zitman in my absence. Mary, alone in her mountain home, with no one to protect her now, spirited away by mysterious hands, and all search for her nugatory on my part! The dull impression left by those disjointed dreams was saddening me yet, and I was anxious to walk it and my headache off together. On the eve of meeting Ellen, let me present a fair front to society, and mar not the family rejoicing!

I thought of Ellen all the way home. The mystery concerning her perplexed me more, the closer I approached to its solution. In my heart I felt aggrieved that she had hidden from me the story of her love—that not till two

months after her marriage had she thought fit to allow the secret to escape. I did not intend to show my sense of being slighted—the hour was too late, and she would be troubled enough, poor girl ! I had only to wish her joy, and pray for a blessing on her future, as I would have her pray, in her turn, for a blessing on my own.

It was strange that I was advancing with a revelation also—that within a few months of each other, Ellen and I should both leave behind for ever the shores of single life.

I found the little shop closed for the night. I roused the echoes of the street by an eccentric *cesserara*, peculiar to myself. Would they remember my old knock, I wondered, and hasten forth to meet me ? Would Ellen and her mysterious husband be awaiting my arrival there ?

A neighbouring church clock struck twelve as the knocker left my hand—the door opened, and my dear grey-haired old mother clasped me in her arms, and began crying on my shoulder very bitterly.

“Courage, my mother—you and I haven’t much to cry about, I hope.”

“Come in, my lad—come in.”

I closed the door behind us, and led my mother

to the back parlour, where the gas jet flickered. Ellen was not there, but seated in her place—how well I knew her favourite position by the chimney-piece!—was, to my surprise, my brother Joseph.

“Where’s Ellen?” I exclaimed.

“You haven’t got the letter—it never reached you!” said my mother.

“What letter?”

“Telling you that they have left London for good.”

“Left London?” I exclaimed; “whence the necessity for this haste—what does it all mean?”

“They have gone back to Nettlewood.”

“WHERE!” I shouted.

“To Nettlewood. Ellen has married Mrs. Zitzman’s brother!”

“Don’t tell me any more just now. I fancy that I must be dreaming.”

I drew a chair before the fire, and sat down to stare at the blazing coals. My brother Joseph surveyed me out of the corners of his eyes, and said nothing—even motioned to his mother not to disturb me for awhile.

The fact was at last finally realized—how it had come about was another matter, which they would

attempt to explain when I was prepared to hear it.

"Now, then."

"Joseph has come on purpose to explain, dear," said my mother; "his shrewd head has it all arranged in systematic order. I haven't strength or method enough to make it clear to you."

"I've been kept up out of my natural rest to make it plain—I've left Mrs. Gear all alone in Newton Street, Canute, and she's going to pieces with fright by this time, and all for your sake."

"Thank you, Joseph. Now go on, please."

Before he began, I shook hands with him, and hoped that he was well. He gave me a sickly smile, and answered that he was pretty well, considering—the last few months perhaps he hadn't been quite himself, he added. He did not look like himself; on the contrary, he was more pale and angular than usual, I thought, but I did not interrupt him to express my thoughts.

"We heard that Mr. Vaughan had married Ellen, after courting her for a year or so, last week. Ellen told that to her mother. Mr. Vaughan called at Newton Street and told me. Mr.

Vaughan was a friend of the family where Ellen has been teaching so long—that's all."

"That's all!" I exclaimed, indignantly; "that's not half of it, Joseph."

"Oh! dear—what more do you want to know?" he said, wearily.

"Something more than the dry facts of this inexplicable case. Why this courtship and marriage have been kept so long in the dark? 'Why I have known nothing till this hour concerning it? Brother, you're driving me mad!' I shouted.

Joseph jumped at my vehemence, and hurt his head against the mantelpiece—my mother began crying again, and wiping her eyes with her silk handkerchief.

"Ellen didn't say anything whilst there was a doubt of Mr. Vaughan's intentions," he commenced again, rubbing the side of his head meanwhile; "and when he married her at last, there were still grave reasons for keeping it in the dark."

"What were they?"

"Ellen and he knows. There were people somewhere set against his marriage, I believe, so the wedding didn't transpire till a week ago; and the reasons for that step were all to be explained when you arrived to-night; and then important

business, Mr. Vaughan said, compelled him to take Ellen to Nettlewood—and away they went to the place you've come from."

"It's a meagre explanation—you know nothing more?"

"Nothing."

"You have seen our sister's husband," I said, "what do you think of him?"

"He's the sharpest man I ever met with," said he, beginning to shudder violently; "an excellent man, clever, and amiable, and—sharp. I should say a wonderful man of business. Ugh! how cold it is!"

"You're not well, Joseph," said my mother; "you haven't been well some time now?"

"Oh! I'm very well, but it's so dreadfully cold. What do *you* think of him, Canute?"

He put his hands on his knees, and leaned forward very eagerly for my answer.

"I have seen but little of him—I cannot judge him yet. He is a mystery to me."

"He is a mystery to him!" muttered my brother to himself; "you—you," looking at me steadfastly, "don't remember ever to have met him before you went to Nettlewood?"

"No."

"Nor any one like him?"

"No—why do you ask?"

"It struck me that I had—that's all," he said, rising, and taking his great-coat from the back of the chair he had been sitting in. "I got your twenty pounds back all right enough, Canute; but, good God, sir, why did you send whole notes through the post, like a madman?"

"Did I?" said I, absently.

"They might have been lost—good night—I wonder what Mrs. Joseph Gear will say to this? Good night, mother."

"Good night, my boy."

He was shuffling out of the shop, when I went after him, leaving my mother in the parlour.

"I may as well relate to you a piece of news now, in case I am compelled to hurry back to Nettlewood in my turn," I said in a low tone, not intended for my mother's ears. "I am going to be married in three weeks."

"To some one with money, surely."

"To Mrs. Zitman."

He gasped for breath, and leaned against the street-door he had opened. He took his hat off, and knocked the pen from behind his ear in passing his full-veined hand across his forehead. He

glared at me as at a spirit that had come from shadow-land to trouble him.

"To whom?" he said at last.

"To Herbert Vaughan's sister — Mrs. Zitman."

He thrust his hat on again, stooped, picked up his pen, and replaced it.

"Good night," he said, with a half groan that escaped in spite of him; "I shall see you to-morrow, perhaps—I must go now."

With the same scared look at me, he stepped into the street, and took his way down it, more round-shouldered than ever. I had never seen him more surprised, and in all my life I had never known him so mysterious.

Closing the door, I went back to my mother's side. From that faithful loving heart I should learn more to throw a light on Ellen's marriage than from the son whose powers of description she valued at so high a rate. I sat down at her side, and took her hand in mine—an action that made her cry again.

"Now, mother, you and I can calmly talk this over by ourselves. You can tell me all that Ellen said and thought at parting with you—all that you think of this mysterious match."

"Oh! my dear Canute, I do not know what to think."

"Tell me the story, or the fragments of it, in your own manner, and leave to me an attempt at its solution."

"But Joseph has so clearly——"

"Never mind Joseph just at present. Now, mother, I am all attention."

My mother began. I need not give at any length her story here—it was indeed fragmentary, pieced by a little fact, and much of guess-work—the guess-work of a mother anxious for the welfare of her youngest child.

The story resolved itself to this—that Ellen had confessed one night to an engagement with Mr. Herbert Vaughan—to a marriage with him late in the month of October last. Whilst there had been uncertainty, whilst there had been only a hope of his love for her, she had kept the subject under ban and interdict; when Vaughan had married her for love, a deep, passionate love akin to infatuation, my mother thought it, she, at his request had still kept it a secret—it was for her husband's welfare that she did so—and had worked on as governess, and been still the daughter to her until last week.

"She loves this man, then?" I asked.

"Passionately, I think. Oh! Canute, dear, don't you believe that he is a man worthy to be loved?"

Had my face already told her that?—had all the doubts which had crowded upon me concerning him stamped themselves so indelibly on my countenance, that this simple-hearted mother could read it like a book?

"Mother, I have no right to judge him," was my reply; "I have seen but little of him."

"He appears very amiable, and—quiet. He is very fond of Ellen."

"The woman who has known him longest, a faithful servant of the household, tells me there is not a better man living. She should know him better than I."

"And his sister—does she seem attached to him?"

"I have but seen them together once or twice—I cannot say. Hoping for the best, mother, let us now speak of my marriage."

"Oh! my goodness!—your marriage, too!"

"That will be a happy one—to which I look forward as to the brightest era in my life."

I told my mother of the engagement between

Mary Zitman and myself—sketched with all a lover's graphic power the picture of my betrothed, dilated on her beauty, gentleness, and child-like trust in me. Of her fortune, that vanished away when I took her for my wife, I spoke but cursorily; it was a fleeting vision, at which I mourned not, and which I treated lightly. That it affected Herbert Vaughan and Ellen, that it left him to work his own way in the world, perhaps—he, a clever and a practical man—was, at least, no wrong to him, his sister's fortune not being his inheritance, nor he having a claim to its possession. If she had died, it must have gone to the Rays in the same manner as it would now pass over to them—and that the life he left her to, and seemed so little to study, would have endured much longer the eternal solitude to which her husband's will had doomed it, I could not believe.

In the midst of my encomiums on my mistress, my mother broke in with :

“And the mother—what is to become of the poor mother, Canute?”

“Do you think I have forgotten her, my dear?”

“Ellen spoke, at parting with me, of the happy home in Cumberland she should set about prepar-

ing for me at once—but I haven't faith in the poor girl's earnest promises, somehow."

"It is possible that I may settle in Cumberland too—I have an offer of partnership which I feel disposed to accept. At least, there is an opening in life there, and where I settle down, there must settle by my side the faithful mother and friend!"

She was a woman of an unselfish disposition—a woman who understood life after all. In the midst of her tears, and of her satisfaction that she was not forgotten in my plans for the future stretching out before me, she said :

"Not to live with you, and harass your young wife with my old-fashioned habits—that will not do—since the world began it never has done, my dear. But if you will find me a little cottage in Cumberland, within a stone's throw of your home, and will come and see me very often, and let your children come to me and learn to love me speedily, why, I—I—I shall be a very happy old woman!"

She broke down again, but it was only at the bright prospect which had dazzled her so much. And before I went to bed that night I promised that *that*, at least, should happen in the days so little distant from me.

"I daresay dear Joseph would like me to live

with him," she said, wiping her eyes at last, "but I'm tired of business and London streets, and I shall only miss one of my children by going with you to Cumberland. When any of us want sound advice, we can come to London for it, after all!"

"Ye-es," I responded.

My mother's faith in her elder son's ability, and her tacit assumption of the inability of good advice to be procured from any other source, had not grown less since our separation. It was a mother's confidence in the son that was growing a rich man, and I did not satirize it. If it rendered her content, of what had I to complain?

A few moments afterwards, my mother drew the blind aside from the parlour window.

"It's very dark, and you can't see the willow well now, Canute. But it's astonishing how bravely it has got on during all the summer and autumn months of your absence."

"We will accept it as an augury of the brave days in store for Ellen, mother."

CHAPTER II.

JOSEPH'S SHREWD HEAD.

DURING my short stay in London, I set myself the task of studying the last will and testament of Samuel Zitman, Esq. It had been the wish of the widow, and it was necessary for her sake, if not for my own, that I should possess a knowledge of it. Samuel Zitman had come to London in search of better health, and lost strength so rapidly after his arrival, that he made his will in a hurry, and died two days after his solicitor had steadied his hand whilst he affixed his signature.

A copy of the will was lodged at the usual office in Doctors' Commons, and I found no difficulty in procuring it. It seemed a mercenary task

to be studying that will there, but my interest was in its details, not in the money, which no power of mine could save for my betrothed.

A strange will, breathing much of the selfishness and narrow-mindedness of him who had dictated it when the death-cloud that no riches could dissipate hung over the house of Zitman.

It bequeathed, under conditions, the whole fortune, chiefly derivable from a copper mine at the back of the Black Gap mountain, to his relict, Mary Zitman. It took away all that property, and left her penniless, if she married a second time—the moment the wedding-ring was on her finger, the wealth of the world faded away, like Cinderella's pomp and parade in the old fairy tale we big children never forget. Not a farthing remained to her from the wealth which Samuel Zitman had accumulated during his life—all the possessions that he had had in his time, or that were purchased after it with his money, went away to his sister, Martha Ray, and to her heirs, executors, or assigns.

This if Mary Zitman married—this if Mary Zitman ever left Nettlewood Vale—this if Mary Zitman died. Whilst she remained true to her first husband's memory, she was free to dispose or spend

her money as she pleased—that which was possible to claim, and which could be proved was purchasable with money derived from the estate, must fade away to nothingness if she became a wife a second time.

There were fifty or a hundred bequests—amongst them an income of one hundred and fifty pounds a year to his well-beloved brother-in-law, Herbert Vaughan, for much kindness and consideration during his illness, and the freehold of the Ferry Inn, with the right of holding the ferry, to his dear sister Martha Ray.

I came to a codicil, duly signed and witnessed, that startled me a little. It was the last idea of poetical justice that Samuel Zitman's mind could suggest. I could see him propped up in his death-bed grimly smiling at his own conceit. It was dated on the following day.

In the "sad, yet possible" event of Mary Zitman's marriage, the freehold of the Ferry Inn, together with all rights held by Mrs. Ray, were to pass into the hands of Mary Zitman and her heirs, successors, and assigns. Thus Mrs. Ray and Mary Zitman were to change places in every respect—it would be in our power, if we wished it, to open the Ferry Inn and begin business on our own account.

I was still studying the will, when my brother Joseph appeared at my elbow.

"I thought I should discover you here, Canute," he said.

"Did you?" I answered drily.

"It's worth considering—it's worth studying before you plunge into genteel poverty, and find there's a wife to support as well as yourself."

"I am studying this at Mrs. Zitman's request. The money is of no consideration to me."

"That's an odd remark. Have you finished?"

"Yes."

"Let us come into the street, then. I want a little talk with you."

We went together into the street a short while afterwards—for the first time in my life I found myself walking arm-in-arm with Joseph Gear down Knight Ryder Street.

In that desolate thoroughfare, with the great gloomy chambers of proctors frowning down upon us, Joseph spoke of Mr. Zitman's will, proved himself thoroughly acquainted with the details thereof.

"You have read this will?"

"Yes."

"For what reason?"

"I had occasion for it—that's all," he said with his customary reserve.

"Well, what do you think of it?"

"Have you made up your mind to marry Mrs. Zitman?" he inquired. "Really, Canute, have you seriously considered the importance—the consequences of such a step?"

"I have."

"Then—then I think I see a way to counteract the full force of the blow aimed at Mrs. Zitman, for a step that her husband feared she would take. I've been thinking of nothing else since you told me last night of your intention."

The shrewd head was in its element, but the cunning and the craftiness expressed upon the face shook my confidence in brother Joseph's sense of honour.

"It's a good turn that deserves another—I'll speak of that other presently, and I don't think you're the man to say no to the bargain."

"What bargain can I possibly make with you, Joseph?"

"Just listen a moment."

He looked over his shoulder to make sure that there were no listeners in the neighbourhood—had he been plotting against church and state he could

not have taken more precaution. He led me into the middle of the road, and walked me up and down in the mud with his arm pressing mine close to his side.

"That will requires back all *that is possible to claim*, all possessions purchased during Mrs. Zitman's widowhood ; but who is to prove the amount of money expended on property, the amount of money given away for charitable purposes, the amount of money drawn from Mrs. Zitman's banker's account. No one can claim money spent or money missing during Mrs. Zitman's widowhood—only that which is left as evidences in brick and mortar or land, excepted. Where the money goes is always difficult to prove—Mrs. Zitman might have been a very extravagant, or a very liberal woman ! That will's like an Act of Parliament—there's a coach and four to be driven slap through it, Canute."

"That'll do—that'll do, Joseph," I cried ; "there may be loop-holes through which to escape with the dead man's money—the money which was his soul, and which he loved before his wife or her future happiness. But I should expect to be haunted by his ghost, and hated by that wife of his, if I strove to gain one sovereign from that

money not lawfully my own. His widow chooses between his wealth and me—do you think that I would sully the purity and unselfishness of her choice by turning robber? Great heavens! Joseph Gear, what prompted you to play so poor a part of tempter?"

Joseph coughed, but he held his ground. Though in my excitement I had flung away my arm from his, he kept by my side, and reasoned with me, as with a froward child, to whom the full force of his argument was not apparent yet. I believe he saw no particular harm in cheating the dead man of his wishes—it was an unjust will, and to be taken advantage of, if possible. It was a choice between independence and indigence, and it was false delicacy, an outrage against the simple precautions of life, if I neglected the one chance that lay open to me before I married Mary Zitman.

But I could not see the fairness of the act; in that wilful obstinacy with which at last he taunted me, I would not listen to any scheme that would endow my future life with more riches than I dreamed of. I thanked him for his interest in my welfare, but I could not think it a "good turn" that turned me off from the straight path of common

honesty and sought by a juggle to deceive. I could not, and I would not think of it, and all the plans which Joseph's shrewd head had built for me were rendered harmless, by an old-fashioned idea of mine as to what was strictly honest.

"Then you are not to be convinced?" said my brother, when he had exhausted all argument upon the subject.

"No, Joseph. More," I added, "I am sorry that you are anxious to convince me."

"For your own good—the welfare of your own future," he cried; "I have no interest in the matter, Canute."

"My dear Joseph, let me thank you again for that interest, but let me advise you in my turn. Will you?"

"What advice of yours can I profit by?" he grumbled.

"Don't think too much of the value of money—that is as bad as disregarding it too much. It has struck me to-day, Joseph, that this money life of yours in Newton Street is cramping up your soul and narrowing your views of what is fair and open. You mean well, but there's a roundabout way towards it, which you practise, and fol-

lowing it too closely will not make you the better man."

"And you, Canute, are too much of a dreamer, and are full of dreamy ideas in consequence," he retorted; "you do unto your neighbour what he would never think of doing unto you at any price—you shut your eyes to your own advancement, your own rights, and prate of honesty and uprightness, whilst others pick your pockets. I call that man a simpleton who studies not his own advancement."

"Whether by a legitimate way, or by a method that may bring him to the bar of the Old Bailey—well," I said, rather too warmly, "*I* call that man a robber, to be locked up away from society as speedily as possible. I would track such a man to the death!"

Joseph took his hat off, and passed his hand across his forehead once more. Something of last night's look appeared to spring into his face again.

"You've woke up since you were last in London," said he, feebly; "you overpower me with this new energy. I am not well, or I don't feel this morning quite so strong to cope with it. I'll wish you a good day, Canute."

We shook hands and parted. But I had not quitted the street, when he came after me, and touched me on the arm.

"If you go away to Cumberland before I see you again, let me wish you joy on your coming marriage? If I could have possibly spared the time, I would have come to Cumberland to the wedding feast."

"Scarcely worth the trouble or expense, Joseph. It will be a very quiet marriage."

"I wouldn't have cared about the trouble or expense for once. Out of brotherly friendship, and to show that we bear each other no enmity."

"Enmity!—is it likely?"

"I hope not. I hope it will never be so bad as that!"

He extended his hand again, and shook mine very warmly in his. He went away after that slowly and dejectedly. For many a long day after that parting between us, I was unable to comprehend this new manner of my elder brother. It was a trifle more mystery to add to the cloud-land which was destined to deepen round my path, and shut me in with it.

CHAPTER III.

MY SISTER'S HUSBAND.

I HAD made up my mind as to my future the next day. Mr. Sanderson's offer was a good one, and a certain means of living, at any rate—with a wife at my side, I could not afford to speculate in uncertainties. My knowledge of architecture and surveying would be of service to my partner; his connection in the county would assist me; together I had no doubt we should earn a fair income, and I, for one, need not mourn over the riches my wife possessed before she married me. That she would never regret the change, herself, I was very well assured.

The licence was procured at Doctors' Commons

the next day, and after a little arrangement with my mother, concerning the disposal of her business, and the time when I should expect her in Cumberland—after all the minor arrangements which precede a man leaving town for good, and a man about to be married into the bargain—I took farewell of my mother, and went away to Nettlewood once more.

It was my wish that my mother should have been present at my wedding, but she was a woman of business in her way, and declined to leave the shop until Joseph—who had promised to take the matter in hand—had found a customer for it. Besides, there were so many things to see about, she added, a little enigmatically, and would prefer coming to me in her own way, in three weeks' or a month's time, when "everything" was settled.

To settle everything, then, on my own side, I started, one early morning, for Cumberland, to take up the thread of that romance begun there.

On the evening of the following day, I crossed Nettlewood Ferry once more. This was a few days after Christmas, when the frost had come back again, and there was a fringe of ice round the margin of the lake.

On the Nettlewood side of the Ferry, I found

Herbert Vaughan awaiting me. My old suspicions concerning him and Letty Ray received almost a death-blow by seeing Mrs. Ray's daughter standing by his side and talking unconcernedly, as the boat's keel ground against the pebbly bank. If I had been deceived in Mr. Vaughan after all—if he were all that could be wished as a husband and a friend!

Very frankly, very warmly he extended his hand towards me as my feet touched the ground.

"Welcome back, Mr. Gear. It is pleasant to get all our old friends in Nettlewood again."

After shaking hands with me, he passed his arm through mine.

"You may imagine that I have much to say to you. In lieu of entering the inn, will you stroll towards Nettlewood House with me—they are impatiently expecting you?"

"Willingly, Mr. Vaughan."

"Letty, see to Mr. Gear's luggage."

"Yes, sir."

Vaughan and I walked along the country road in the direction of Nettlewood House. It was not until we had passed the few thatched residences beyond the Ferry Inn, that he condescended to reply to my interrogative as to whether his sister

and mine were well. For a time the meaning of my question did not appear to sink into his mind; he was looking straight before him, and there was an intensity of thought on his face—I could see it in the half-darkness of the night.

“Well,” he said, at last—“oh! yes, they are both well.”

“I received a letter from your sister three days ago, Mr. Vaughan.”

“Yes, yes, I know,” he answered, hastily. “In the first place, let us speak of her. It is a subject on which we may not agree, and the sooner we end our discussion the better.”

“Yes—I think so.”

“Allied as I am to you, now, by my marriage with your sister, I have some difficulty in opening this case. Scenes and characters have changed in the few months that we have known each other, and it is as hard to arrive at a fair conclusion to your motives, as, possibly, you have found it to decipher mine. Mine, at least, are easily explained, and have no hidden reasons in the background.”

“Surely, you do not think——”

“Patience, Mr. Gear—will you let me lay the matter before you in my own way?”

"Certainly."

Let me begin by telling you that had I ever dreamed of my sister breaking a solemn promise made to me, and marrying again, I should have remained a single man myself. It is a frank confession, when I assure you that, relying upon your sense of honour, and the firmness of my sister to keep her word, long pledged to me, I married Ellen Gear two months ago."

"My sense of honour!" I said, not a little warmly, "how has that been affected by my proposal to your sister?"

"I left her in trust with you—I confided in you!"

"Mr. Vaughan, I made no promise to you; I was not bound to study your happiness before my own."

"Pardon me," was the quick reply, "but is it happiness?"

"I believe so."

"I believe that it is one desperate headlong plunge to misery, in which you drag her down with you. I honestly believe that you will be as surely the agent to her early death, as though you had struck at her with a knife."

He uttered this very passionately, but it was

with a demonstrative degree of heat that suggested the actor rather than the injured man. His sharp searching looks into my face that starlight night appeared to me to be watching intently the effect of this simulated passion. For it *was* simulated, although I had only a vague suspicion at the time he spoke to me.

"In what manner do I drag her down with me to so sad a fate, Mr. Vaughan?" I calmly inquired.

"You take away that which has supported her position in society; you dash a delicate woman from riches to beggary with one blow. All the refinements of life, all the luxuries to which she has become habituated, you deprive her of, and replace by what is at the best merely respectable indigence. My sister is a flower whom a breath would injure—only those who have known her and been with her all her life can comprehend her ways."

"My faith to make that life a happy one is very strong, sir. Strong as my love for her."

"You would be showing the true strength of that passion and its utter unselfishness by resigning her. I pledge my word that the change will be her death."

"I pledge my word that the change will be new life to her," I answered quickly.

The fears that he would arouse in me I flung back with a hasty scorn which beat them down at once. There was but one more card to play, and he dashed it before me at once—his last stake for the prize he already felt was past all hope of striving for. However, the card was there to play, and he cast it before me like a gauntlet.

"There is one more reason against this match; and I have kept it back for her sake—I rely upon your confidence to let it remain a secret between us. *My sister is mad!*"

He pressed my arm, and hissed forth those awful words with an intensity that iced my blood, though I swerved not for an instant from the settled purpose I had formed.

"She has been mad for years," he continued; "by fits and starts, subject to strange delusions, such as I need scarcely dwell upon at this time. At one period she believed herself in love with Mr. Wenford—if this new passion for yourself should be as evanescent as that old attachment, which, whilst it lasted, deceived so utterly my friend! It was this madness which her late husband feared when he composed so strange a will—it is this

madness which I call upon you to consider, ere the fatal step be taken which binds you irrevocably to a demented woman."

"If she be ever afflicted with so sad a malady, Mr. Vaughan," I said, "I will love and cherish her the more. In my hands, and under my unceasing care for her, such delusions as *she may have* shall be dissipated by my true affection. If Mary Zitman do not fear to trust her life with me, I seek—I covet—the responsibility of making it a brighter and more happy one."

"I have done," he said, after a long pause, "I have no more to say. Of my own disappointment, of my downfall, of your sister's, I cannot ask you to consider, whilst the rash impulse urges you onward to a fate I can but pity. In the future days, when you are face to face with all that I have warned you of, you will but have yourself to reproach, and I at least shall stand blameless in the matter. There, Mr. Gear, I have done with the subject for ever. *For ever!*" he repeated between the teeth, which closed instinctively like a vice together.

We walked on—the attack had failed, and my defence at least had been too strong for him. It became my turn now, and we changed places.

"Before we reach Nettlewood House, Mr. Vaughan, let me ask you for an explanation of this engagement and marriage with my sister Ellen? Possessing also a sister who has been my care from childhood, to whom I have fancied myself standing in the position of guardian since her father's death, whom I have loved, and who has had few secrets from me, let me ask you rather than her to explain actions which would have borne the light as well as the darkness."

"It is entangled with the subject which, a moment ago, I said should be done with for ever."

"I do not see that."

"It crosses motives of my own which bear not upon the story, and which I too am not called upon to explain. That which affects my wife and you I am ready to allude to."

"I am prepared to listen."

There was another long pause, another of those steady looks down the dark road, as though beyond there in the murkiness of the night lay the fragments of the scheme which he had worked with such success. He began.

"I need not call to your remembrance the motive for your first appearance at Nettlewood," he said, "the story of the building plans and of

your summons to your fate! My sister, to whom I am compelled to recur again, was then beset by the delusion of escaping from her present home to a new mansion, and of selling to me the old one."

I fancied that his eyes glanced towards me for a moment—that I could see them glittering in my direction. He appeared even to be waiting for my comment on this prelude to his revelations, but the remark struck me more a few days hence than then.

"Possessed with the fear of ghostly figures haunting the old house, of a mysterious danger for ever threatening her within it, she determined to erect a new mansion at a little distance, and sought my advice respecting it. I did not object—I knew that to thwart her, or attempt to reason with her, would but increase her malady; so I drew up an advertisement, soliciting plans for competition, and trusted in time to dissipate her folly. The advertisement was published—the plans arrived in due course—yours amongst the number. There were three plans more worthy than the rest—yours amongst the number again."

All this explanation appeared to dwell too much upon his sister's weakness of mind—even that fact

he kept before me with a persistence—almost a cruelty—that I could not escape from. All the while, not a word from Ellen, or of his engagement to her.

“Well—well!” I said, a little impatiently.

“Patience, Mr. Gear, I am on the threshold of the little mystery that troubles you so much. I am about to wound your feelings, and I naturally pause to consider the most graceful method of doing so.”

His lip curled as he spoke, I felt assured. The story of the unfair preference of my plans to “Esperans” was coming now. I could not curtail matters by confessing that I was already well acquainted with it.

“There were three plans,” he continued; “two just passing mediocrity, one the work of a man of genius. The man of genius, who signed himself ‘Esperans,’ was the favourite competitor with Mrs. Zitman; I, for reasons of my own, and shutting my eyes against the merits of Esperans’ drawings, decided, after two months’ deliberation, in favour of yourself.”

“And those reasons?”

“Patience, sir,” he repeated again; “I have always understood that you were so contented a

man, that Patience Gear was often the home cognomen bestowed upon you."

I apologized for the interruption.

"Let me confess to an extraordinary degree of precaution in this matter," he said, "to following step by step the lives of two men during those months in which my sister and I resolved to deliberate. I went to London ostensibly on business, really to study the characters of 'Esperans' and yourself. You had addressed us in initials, care of your brother in Newton Street—my father was a solicitor, who had done business in his time for your brother, and there was a loop-hole to his acquaintance, and therefore a clue to your identity. I was not long in discovering that you were a poor clerk in an architect's office, a patient, plodding, unambitious man to all outward appearance. 'Esperans' had inclosed his real name and address in a sealed envelope, which I had opened and resealed before leaving Nettlewood. I shock you," he added, detecting my slight start, "but it was my only means of ascertaining the whereabouts of this mysterious genius, and there was too much at stake to stand upon false delicacy. I found out 'Esperans'—I discovered in him a successful man, a young, clever, and singularly handsome man,

with whom my romantic sister would have immediately fallen in love."

"I will not have this!" I cried.

"Pardon me, but she *is* romantic," he said, "and she would have loved this man. I wish to God that she had!" he added, bitterly, "for in summoning you to Nettlewood I overreached myself. This accursed over-caution," he cried, vehemently, "has always been my bane. I thought that Mary Zitman was at least safe with you—you were quiet, unobtrusive, even shy. You were a man who had known poverty for many years of life, and had not the means to keep a wife. For two months at a distance, and by divers methods, I studied your character—I formed the acquaintance of the family wherein your sister was governess, in order more fully to elicit from her the salient points of your character. I studied you through her, slowly and carefully, and again the over-caution led me astray—I fell in love with your sister Ellen."

"Astray! Surely not astray, Mr. Vaughan?"

"As the result is, what else can I consider it?" he answered, moodily.

"It led to your happiness. You have gained

one of the best, one of the most affectionate hearts in the world."

"I am not complaining," he said, coolly; "will you allow me to conclude?"

I nodded assent.

"I disguised, so far as lay in my power, all evidence of the mad passion that suddenly sprung up in my heart for her. I came back to Nettlewood with that passion unconfessed. Even then, unless I could feel assured of my sister's resolve to remain single, I determined not to bring a bride home here to indigence; but when I was most assured of Mrs. Zitman's resolve, I proposed to Ellen. Whilst I was in doubt I went to London several times, and fluttered about the flame that lured me on, and yet which the sternness of my resolution kept from engulfing me. There may be madness in all our family, for my love for her was a madness that could not be resisted—that she saw at last, although I melted not the ice between us with my burning words. Her splendid beauty turned my brain, but led me not, as I thought, to folly. When my sister, in a paroxysm of excitement, from which she suffers at times, swore at last to remain single for my sake, I foolishly believed in her, and offered my hand to your sister.

It had been a long love between us then, and there was no need for a long engagement to follow it. We were married."

"With a secrecy that is, as yet, incomprehensible to me."

"I feared for a while that force of example to Mary; feared even—for she is a strange woman—that she might resent my marriage. Business kept me in London, and until I could break the news myself, I would not risk the discovery to her. But when you were coming to London, I returned hither at once. It struck me that if a few days in Nettlewood were left me to reason calmly with Mary for her own future happiness and peace, I should be doing her a service, and rescuing you from an infatuation that must inevitably end in ruin to us all. There, it is a frank avowal of my deeds of darkness. Do you blame me?"

It was frank, but it perplexed me. It was a long and minute explanation, but it scarcely satisfied me. Through all its intricacies I could fancy there ran a darker under-current, which he confessed not, and which the apparent frankness of his manner hid from me. It was, perhaps, a natural struggle to prevent his sister sacrificing a large fortune for my sake, but the stealthy plot-

ting to which he had confessed was startling. This was a man that worked on and made no sign—a man that was dangerous by his very silent method of procedure.

If he had told me all, he was a cunning man to be ever on one's guard against—if all this confession were a *melange* of truth and falsehood, pieced skilfully together to deceive and bewilder, it were better that Mary and I were married at once, and an end put to all profitable scheming. In either case I felt sorry, intensely sorry, that this man had become my sister's husband—the conviction of his unworthiness impressed itself more strongly upon me with every step I took by his side. His was a mind to whose depths it would be ever impossible to fathom—there was no comprehending the complex machinery at work behind that high forehead, from which he removed his hat at that moment, to allow the frosty air to cool the fire there.

“Is there anything else I can explain?” he asked.

I hesitated. The night he left for London, when I saved Letty from her search after death in Nettlewood Lake, recurred to me, but I had not seen him that night, and Letty's manner had changed since then, and rendered the past all like

a dream. It scarcely seemed my province to intrude upon that ground—to suggest, in that direction, those doubts of him which he might not have condescended to explain—which would have only set him against me more, I thought.

For I felt that, though we still walked on side by side, and went in that amiable contiguity along the carriage drive of Nettlewood House, that I had made him my enemy, and that till his dying day he would never forgive the blow I had struck at his pride and his position.

“Now for the ladies,” he said, applying his hand to the knocker, and raising the echoes of the place—“the wife, and the wife that is to be!”

CHAPTER IV.

I AM MARRIED.

THEY were awaiting me anxiously in the drawing-room—Mary and Ellen. Both loving women, born with loving hearts, quick to act upon a generous impulse, and no slaves to ceremony, were at my side before we were scarcely announced.

“My dear Canute!” escaped from both of them.

Herbert Vaughan turned aside with a smile—a quiet smile, expressive of his superiority to these emotions—and the instant afterwards was running his hands through his hair, and studying the general effect of that operation in the great looking-glass above the mantelpiece, or watching the reflection of our figures therein. Which?

I had grown very suspicious lately—the common acts of every-day life seemed to me but feints to conceal a different purpose. It was a bad habit, which would grow upon me, if I did not my best to check it.

I was even suspicious that there had been stormy days during my absence between Herbert Vaughan and his sister—the sister's face was so much more thin and pale than when I had seen it last.

"You have been ill, Mary," I cried at once; "you have been troubled!"

"No, no—I have been only anxious about you, dear. All the bright smiles and the old light and life will come back now!"

"And Nellie," said I, returning her embrace, "whom I little expected to meet at Nettlewood House, whom I have to congratulate on her wedding, and for whose lasting happiness I have so many best wishes to bestow!"

"Thank you," she answered, "I shall be very happy now, Canute. The troubles of life have gone for ever—the petty vexations of teaching which worried me, and which I used to complain of so often, and worry you in my turn. And you have no reproaches to make, like a dear generous-hearted brother as you are. No reproaches for

keeping my marriage a secret, as Herbert wished, for two or three months, till he could make it up with Mary here! But at last I could not keep that secret from the mother, Canute—it was an unnatural position, and I dashed through it, even a little while before my nervous husband intended. But,” with a bright smile in his direction, “he did not scold me very much—I had only forestalled him by two days, he said.”

“Scarcely more,” he answered.

“Herbert and you are friends?” she asked eagerly.

Herbert veered round from the glass and faced us.

“The best friends in the world,” he said lightly; “friends who have a difference of opinion on divers subjects, but have a graceful habit of expressing it, and don’t feel inclined to cut one another’s throats for the sake of the difference. The very best of friends—eh, Mr. Gear?”

“I see no valid reason why we should be enemies.”

He advanced and held out his hand towards me; we shook hands together, the pledge of our good faith for the future. He did not smile much over the ceremony—he was not a simpering man at the

best of times, or when in the best humour. He simply shook hands and relapsed into a seat at the table, taking up that old illuminated missal which I had noticed in his hands the first night of my acquaintance with him.

"Will you not come to the fire, Herbert, and join in the general conversation on matters important to the common weal?" asked Ellen.

"Presently, dear," he replied; "my head aches to-night."

He leaned his forehead on his hand, and bent a little more forward over his book. Looking at him, I noticed that he looked pale and weary that night. Possibly the re-action after his minute attack and defence had set in and was trying him somewhat.

He observed my glance towards him.

"When we are better acquainted, Gear—when you are one of the family, that is—you will perceive that I am a great sufferer at times from these confounded headaches. To-night, too, when I have so much work before me."

"That don't mean the key turned in the study lock, Herbert?" asked his wife.

"I am afraid so, to-night."

After a while, and when we three were seated together, he rose and left the room.

"Hard work 'and not my will, consents,'" he said by way of half-quotation before he closed the door after him.

It was a relief to two of us at least to feel that he was gone—possibly to three, for that once.

"You have not quarrelled, Canute?" Ellen asked again, and again I reassured her.

"He is dull and absent to-night," said Ellen, "something appears to have disturbed him."

"My dear Ellen, he is subject to these fits of anxious thought," said Mrs. Zitman; "you must not grieve so early in the day to see a cloud upon his brow. It will come at times—he is a studious man."

"Oh! I am not grieving, Mary," cried Ellen—"I am not going to grieve all my life!"

"I hope not."

"I changed my whole career to be happy, and I shall be ever the most contented of women. Never a one in the whole world, Canute, to say what is preying on the mind of Mrs. Vaughan that she looks so careworn now!"

She said it with a haughty toss of her handsome

head—sitting before me she appeared one strong to endure and make no sign. I believed her then, though the words were uttered carelessly, almost lightly. Never a one would know all that story of the life lying beyond.

“Ellen and I have been holding counsel together all day,” said my betrothed; “quite a counsel of war, like two romantic girls, as we are in our hearts. We were afraid that Herbert might way-lay you at the Ferry, and overwhelm you with his reasons for believing why you and I are the most unfitting couple in the world.”

She had adopted Ellen's light vein too, but her face told more than Ellen's.

“What does Ellen think of our engagement?” I asked.

“The best thing that could have happened for both of you. But don't tell Herbert, or he will be dreadfully cross. You men,” she added, “always think so differently to us women.”

“Why, I think it is the best thing that could have happened, too,” I said, laughing.

“If it left us very, very poor indeed, I would be glad of it for your sake, Canute, even for the sake of my new sister, who loves you so well, I am trebly glad. And to think that Herbert and I,

and Canute and you, will only be a little way apart, if you like this partnership that Mary has been telling me of."

We chatted together pleasantly enough that winter's evening—Mrs. Zitman's face gradually became less thoughtful, less indicative of a suppressed excitement. Ellen's manner, light and buoyant, as befitted a young wife, exercised its effect upon her new sister, particularly after Ellen had twitted her with her grave demeanour.

"My dear Ellen, I am happy enough in my way. To-night," laying her hand confidently in mine, "I was never more happy or more inclined to be thankful."

A short while afterwards, Ellen was seized with the idea that we might feel happier in her absence.

"I am going to rouse that studious husband of mine, and bring him back from his lair," she said; "there must be no dusty books and papers between him and his love for me."

When she had left the room, Mary Zitman turned her great wondering eyes to me.

"Is it not surprising?"

"What is surprising, Mary?"

"That she should have loved him, married him,

and come to this dull house to be shut up with him for ever. That my old life, from which I am escaping, should be taken up when I leave here, and continued on by her who deserved so different a fate. Oh! Canute," she cried, strongly excited, "if I had only known your sister six months, three months ago!"

"What do you know against *him*, that makes you fear so much for Ellen?"

"Hush!—not so loud—the very walls have ears here," she said; "I know nothing, Canute—I have seen nothing; but, still he—he has never loved me much, or been kind to me, and I," dropping her voice to a low whisper, "I fear for her!"

"She is strong—she has seen much of the world, and is naturally light-hearted. This is a love-match, Mary."

"She is a brave woman—I was always a coward," she said, with a little shudder.

I passed my arm round her, and drew her to my side. She looked into my eyes eagerly still.

"I pray they may be happy together, Mary," I said; "happy as we shall be in the fair afterwards."

"Tell me all that he said to-night to turn you against me?"

"All that he said!"

"You have been very thoughtful—something that he has said is preying on you—something that he has said against me!"

"He has said nothing to alarm me, to shake my love and faith in you—my confidence to make you happy, and to be happy in your true love for my unworthy self."

"You—you will bear with me, Canute, always?"

"Did he say that I should not?"

She started and coloured. I had no doubt of the strength of the attack from which this poor woman had suffered.

"Don't speak of this—don't let us ever recur to the by-gones when we are married. In the new life, the shadow of the old steals away for ever."

"To-morrow I present the licence to our worthy vicar—next Monday I purpose claiming you for good."

"Next Monday to be free—to go away with you, never to return here again! Oh! Canute, trust in me ever!—I will never do anything but love you with my whole heart!"

I believed it—I let the gloomy thought which Herbert Vaughan had sown within me go its way down the dark gulf, fitting for such things' recep-

tion. Looking into that face, I could trust the depth and endurance of her love. It never swerved from me—that trust was never abused.

* * * * *

We were married at the little church in the Vale between Henlock and Nettlewood. Married in a simple fashion, befitting the new estate into which we were about to enter.

There was no pomp of circumstance about the wedding—no wedding guests bidden to do honour to the feast. It had been Mary Zitman's wish, seconded by mine. Still, the news of the marriage had been bruited about the Vale, and been carried from the Black Gap mountain to the villages beyond Henlock, where the workmen who toiled at the great house were located, where the villagers had been cheered by the good lady's bounty, where a little news went a great way, and made an extraordinary stir.

Everybody who had the health, or could afford the time, managed to appear at the church doors; the shepherds who had been hunting for "strays" on the mountains, came down at the appointed hour, and peeped through the doors at us; old women and young ones mustered pretty thickly in the

time-eaten pews, and watched the ceremony. Mr. Wenford, in the Wenford family pew, which he so seldom patronized, sat stolidly surveying the scene, and at its completion came forward to shake Mary Zitman by the hand.

"I'm a rough fellow—a bad fellow—but let me say God bless you, and wish you joy, Mrs. Gear."

"Thank you," she murmured.

"I suppose I must wish joy to you," he said to me, bluntly, "though I haven't forgotten the march stolen upon me. There won't be much joy in the world for her without you, so take my best wishes, if they're worth anything."

"And will you receive my best wishes, Mr. Wenford?" said my wife.

"For what?"

"For your better and happier life."

"Thank you," removing the Polichinello cap with which his head was surmounted that morning, "but I'm case-hardened against good wishes. I'm getting more of a knave and villain every day— isn't that true, Vaughan?"

He turned to Herbert Vaughan, an attentive listener to this.

"Not being your father-confessor, how should I know, Wenford?" he answered.

"You know everything!" he said, bursting into a hoarse laugh, that sounded particularly inappropriate at the moment; "you know too much, you clever scamp, you!"

He laid his hand on my brother-in-law's shoulder and shook him roughly in his boisterous excitement,—shook his hat from his head on to the chequered stones at his feet.

"If you had been a friendly neighbour, you would have asked me to the wedding feast," he said.

"It was my wish," said Vaughan.

"Well, you spared my feelings, all of you," he cried, with a second boisterous laugh, "and I can drink the health of the happy couple at home, instead. By all that's holy, I'll drink myself mad drunk to-night!"

He strode out of the church, and the instant afterwards we heard another peal of laughter echoing in the frosty air outside. He was laughing vociferously still when the wedding party followed—we found him leaning against a tombstone, holding both his gloved hands to his sides. Facing him, shaking a stick at him, and, perhaps, only prevented from flinging it at him by the pressure of her daughter's hand, stood Mrs. Ray, recently

alighted from the fly which Jabez had driven to the church gates.

Not the Mrs. Ray of early days, but an old woman weighed down by a black velvet dress, and a set of costly sables, over which meandered a massive gold chain. Her daughter by her side was in the usual home-spun every-day attire, and rendered contrast with her mother still more noteworthy.

"It's your time to laugh, it seems, Mad Wenford," she croaked, "but my time's coming, you impudent jackanapes. Mayn't I see my own kith and kin married without your imperence?"

"Don't you know that they've broken off the match at the altar—that that's the subject of my laughter, you old witch, you!"

"Oh! good Lud ha' mercy on us all!" shrieked Mrs. Ray, "if it's not a lie, I'm a ruined woman, and shall drop down dead here. Hold me tighter, Letty, I'm a-going!"

She saw us coming from the church—Mary leaning on my arm, and all doubt was dissipated.

"I knew it was another lie of that man's," she cried. "Mrs. Gear," turning to my wife, "I've come a long way to see the bride and bridegroom—to make sure that my long hoped for happiness

was coming with your own. Come to say that I shan't be too proud to see you in the new home you've been kind enough to build for me."

"You are welcome to it all, Mrs. Ray—I am glad to leave my riches behind with my old name. If they do not make you more happy than myself, you will regret the sad inheritance."

"Never—never—never!" cried Mrs. Ray; "it's what I've toiled for all my life—it's what I almost sold my soul for! This day is the happiest that ever I've knowed, or hope to know. Letty, girl, remind me, just for once, to say my prayers to-night. It's on'y common gratitude!"

CHAPTER V.

"JANET'S CHOICE."

IT was not the brightest or gayest of wedding festivals ; Herbert Vaughan, at least, appeared to do his best, or worst, to give a character of gloom to it. He complained of his old headache more than once, and sat pressing one hand against his forehead, and leaning his elbow on the table in an attitude that was familiar to us.

I believe that all this dulness on his part was assumed ; that he had his reasons for depressing us, for evidencing to us that he felt the loss of his sister and of her possessions most acutely. Ellen exerted herself to the utmost ; she was always light-hearted even in that house of shadow, and

her bright cheery words, her wishes for our happiness, her fancy word-pictures of the future, wherein that happiness would come to us, counteracted the impression which her husband might have possibly wished to convey.

Not that Mary and I should have felt the attempt very keenly, or have suffered from it that day ; we were quietly happy ; our hearts were full ; both were glad that suspense was over and death alone had power to come between us. The last step had been taken, the dark past no more belonged to her, and all the fancies, hopes of the new life were crowding thickly on her. In that past she had never had confidence ; in the future she had but one fear—that I might tire of her, and love her less than then. That was a fear easily dissipated, and so the bright vista beyond lay steeped in sunshine, and there was not a cloud to mar its radiance.

We were going at once to our new house at Keswick. I had seen Mr. Sanderson ; the partnership between us had been agreed upon ; he had found for me a cottage a little way from the town, close to the fair lake of Derwentwater. A little cottage standing on a fair slope of grass land, backed by the distant mountains—a track of fertile

land stretching away down the Vale of Borrowdale—Arcadia in the first flush of our honeymoon. A carriage was waiting to take us the circuitous but only route through Henlock and other villages to the foot of the Vale, and round the base of the mountains, across which I had been jolted in a car a little while ago. Twenty-five or thirty miles at least, and therefore a journey necessitating an early start.

When we were ready to depart, Mr. Vaughan kissed his sister and shook hands with me.

“Let me assure you both that I bear no malice,” he said, “that the misfortune which this step has brought to me, I will do my best to support. For each and all of us in this room together a new life from this day—I pray for each and all a better one, and one less liable with some to misconstruction.”

He looked at his sister steadily as he uttered those last words. The answer to his peroration came at once.

“If I have misconstrued you, Herbert, in any way, at any time, I ask you to forgive me. Remember how sad and lonely a life mine was with you, and how there was much impossible to understand without the solution which you never deigned

to give me. If I have been wrong, think no more of it—if we have not understood each other, let it remain in doubt whose fault it was. We need not dwell morbidly upon a past we quit for ever.”

“No,” he answered.

“We shall be better friends now—why, the old love we had as boy and girl may all come back again!”

“It may,” he answered drily; “I am no prophet, and the future for us all is difficult to guess at. The rose-coloured spectacles you see through have been dashed from my vision, but I am sanguine still. In my own power to work my way unaided, I have confidence. There are many enemies awaiting me, but they must fall!”

He pressed his hand upon the back of the chair against which he was standing with a force that made its joints crack. The enemy beneath that hand would have little hope of mercy.

My adieux with Ellen were not accompanied with half forgiveness, or faint allusions to a past that had been incomprehensible; she flung her arms round me and reiterated her wishes for my lasting happiness—wishes which I returned for her sake.

“You leave me to assume Mrs. Zitman’s posi-

tion here—has it been so hard a post to fill?” she asked.

“I know very little of the difficulties of it, Nellie.”

“We are different characters—she is a weak woman requiring a strong man’s love—I can fight my way here in a better spirit.”

“I trust the strong man’s love will not desert you.”

“Oh! I am confident—in the future, concerning which there has been so much talk, I see nothing to fear,” she said. “God bless you, Canute, ever a dear friend and a good brother!”

She flung her arms round me impetuously, and kissed my cheek. It was wet with her tears, the moment afterwards.

In the hall were assembled the servants to wish joy to their late mistress—the pock-marked man with the low forehead, James Barnes by name, was the most profuse in his congratulations. Janet, with her hand on the door, ready to open for us, stood there grim and silent—to the “best wishes, my lady, long life and happiness, my lady,” of her contemporaries, she gave now and then a contemptuous sniff. She was a woman of the world, who knew the value at which to estimate

these vain professions of attachment. My wife turned to her at last—the one faithful servant of the past.

“Well, Janet, my own Janet, never a word to the old mistress who worried you to death with her fancies?”

“I canna say mair than these say,” she said, with a strange gulping in her throat; “I can think mair, but dinna ken *how* to say it.”

“I can guess all that you think,” said Mary, taking her great bony hands in hers.

“Na, ye canna—please God, ye ne’er wull!” she cried.

Herbert Vaughan and his wife stood a little apart from them—Janet looked towards them over the childlike figure facing her.

“All I can say now is, God bless ye! All I can promise ye—and it’s everythin’, lassie—is a bright life, and mair roses on yeer cheeks frae this day. Mr. Gear,” turning to me, “this lassie that I nursed, ye’ll take care of and prize?”

“More than my own life, Janet.”

“I war sure o’ that frae the first,” she said, triumphantly.

“And you, Janet,” said my wife, still holding her hands in hers, “are not to part from us.

Canute and I have talked of this together. You are to serve us in the humble home as you did me in the great one, and we shall wait for your coming every day."

Janet turned red, then white. I could see the hard features soften, and the nether lip quiver very much. After a while she freed her hands, and passed one across her eyes.

"It brings the salt in 'em," she muttered, "but it keeps me firm. Ye're an auld freend, Miss Mary, but Mister Herbert's an aulder. He's a bairn I loved before ye war born, and my heart's loth to quit him. Till he say go, I maun stop here. I *wull*!" she added, with a greater emphasis.

"Herbert will spare me this one friend," said my wife, turning to him; "he will let Janet be with me as of old?"

"Janet has only her choice to make," said Herbert; "I do not seek to influence her. Let her act as her heart prompts her."

"Mister Herbert, I've thocht it ower lang, and I'm na shaken. I'll stay wi' ye, till ye tell me I'm undesarving, and I'd better gae. But oh! my dear young meestress, I'll pray for ye here, and serve ye here. Ne'er to forget ye in the lang arterwards, when I'm takin' care o' *him*."

Vaughan laughed at Janet's earnestness, laughed in a more triumphant manner when Janet, as if anxious to escape temptation, crossed the hall, and took her place by his side.

"Here is one at least, Mary, who has understood me—who has never misconstrued my actions," he said.

Those were his last words—his last implication that she had not thought of him in all fairness, or as a sister should think.

We left them in the hall, and entered the carriage waiting for us. The servants trooped down the steps into the front garden, to give us a parting cheer. Janet followed and flung her shoe after the carriage. Herbert and Ellen waved their hands to us from the doorway.

My wife flung her arms round my neck, and began to weep passionately.

"Oh! Herbert, if *I have* misunderstood him—have judged him by my own wild thoughts!"

"Well, he has forgiven you, Mary. The curtain falls on the past life."

She clung close to me, and whispered—

"Never let us speak or think of that life again."

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BOOK V.

IN THE MISTS.

“ All do so like saints appear,
We know not who's a devil here.”

CANIDIA. 1683.

“ *Exupere.* L'apparence vous trompe, et je suis en effet—
Léontine. L'homme le plus méchant que la nature ait fait.”

CORNEILLE.

CHAPTER I.

KESWICK VISITORS.

LIFE began anew in Keswick for my wife—the happiness which friends had prophesied came with it; the forebodings of her brother went further and further distant, might have been represented by the mist upon the mountain tops fading away neath the dawn of fairer weather.

We were very happy—for we were content. There was no regret for the fortune which had vanished, and left her poor by comparison. It had been ever a dead weight upon her natural spirits, and, once removed, she was a different woman. We had shut the door in the face of the past, and resolved never to re-open it and let in

the crowd of doubts and mysteries upon the other side—we two sanguine natures who believed implicitly in our power to suppress all memory of the days that had gone. Now and then we verged close upon that past; incidents that we could not escape, and which were allied to it, forced themselves upon us, and brought back some fragments of Nettlewood times, but we held our way, and passed them by as rapidly as possible. It was a gloomy era when she was a rich woman, and lived in the great house in Nettlewood Vale; keep it for ever in the background, far distant from the brightness of the present, wherein she lived in earnest and knew no sorrow!

My partnership with Mr. Sanderson had begun, and was likely to prosper. That staid persevering old bachelor, who lived over his office in the High Street, let not the grass grow under his feet, but was a man to push himself forward with the country gentlemen, and suggest alterations before they had warmed to the idea. He was a practical hard-headed man, much respected in the county; he did his work well and honestly, and had not imbibed that trick of swindling his employers, for which builders as well as other tradespeople are somewhat famous in more civilized districts. He

was our "company" at our little cottage in the summer evenings that had come to us six months after we had left Nettlewood—partial to a pipe in the summer-house and a gossip over business progress. I have been ever proud of that man's confidence in me, of winning in some unaccountable way that man's affections. He has often attempted to explain it by saying—

"I took to you, Mr. Gear, because you were straightforward," as though I had been the first straightforward being who had alighted amidst the Cumberland Fells. Still, he "took to me," and was like a father to me after his fashion; I believe that I was ever to him more the son than the partner.

When we settled down in Keswick, I was at first startled by his old-fashioned politeness to my mother, resident then but a stone's throw from our cottage, and had dim visions of his attempt to make a match of it in that quarter. But the vision faded, though the old-fashioned politeness remained, and he always called to ask after my mother's health, before he passed her cottage to proceed to my own.

My mother had disposed of her business, her stock and good-will, at a fair valuation, and had

come on to Cumberland in the spring. She had brought with her, at a startling expense, the willow that Ellen had planted many years ago, and it had arrived in Keswick, much damaged from unsympathetic guards and porters, and the clumsy packing of the Cumberland lad who brought it from the station to Keswick in a waggon.

"There's been a good deal of earth packed round the roots," said my mother to me on the day of its arrival, "but they've smashed the branches dreadfully, and I'm afraid it will never get over the shock."

"Was it worth all the expense of conveyance?" I ventured to remark.

"I didn't like to part with it," said my mother, inclined to cry at my unfeeling observation; "I knew it when it was such a little thing, and to me it's a part and parcel of Ellen's life—Ellen who planted it when she was a child. Everybody told me how expensive it would be to get here, and how impossible for it to live when it arrived, and I gave it up till the last day but one, and then I had two men to take it carefully out of the ground."

"And we'll have two men to put it carefully in the ground, mother," I answered; "now it's

here, I'm very glad to see it. Why, it's part of the old home, too!—is it not, mother?"

"To be sure."

"She's a woman of feeling, that mother of yours," said Mr. Sanderson, who had heard the dialogue; "she's got a little poetry in her somewhere, and it will keep her heart green and young to the last. Let you and me lend a hand to the willow this evening—we'll take more care than the strangers."

So Mr. Sanderson and I planted the willow in Cumberland soil; and the former, backing against the house to obtain a good perspective view, muttered:

"It's in an awful condition, and I'm afraid will never get better, lad. You'll have to break that fact to your mother by degrees."

I had seen it arrive at Kennington Road under circumstances almost as adverse to its chances of existence, and so had faith in the life in it still. I even expressed that faith to my mother, who had been watching rather ruefully the operation of planting, and kept her sanguine till the late spring, when it struggled once more into greenness.

My mother ran breathless to our cottage one morning, with the glad tidings that there was a

bud shooting forth, and Mary and I congratulated her on the event. I believe she wrote to Ellen that evening a full account of the discovery that she had made.

This was in the spring, and my story re-opens in the summer time—in the late June days, when Cumberland ever looks its best. In the interim between my marriage and the early summer time, not a great deal had occurred to affect the progress of this story. Ellen and her husband were in the great house at Nettlewood still; it had become the property of Herbert Vaughan, by some means which I could not understand—which it was not my business to discover. The sole executor to the will of the late Mr. Zitman was Mr. Edwards, the rector of Nettlewood and Henlock, and he, at least, was satisfied with the particulars of the case. Herbert had purchased the house of his sister, and the money had been paid into her bankers at Carlisle—it was all plain and clear, here were his deeds, and there was his sister's banker's book to testify to the fact. The house's worth in lieu of the house, and no clause in the will exempting the widow from buying or selling. The Ferry Inn had passed into our hands, and was let to Jabez Clarke, who had become ambi-

tious of setting up in business for himself. The house that I had designed, and the building of which I had superintended, was—along with much money and land—now in the possession of Mrs. Martha Ray.

These were the chief changes that had come over Nettlewood ; over Newton Street, City, in the house of my brother Joseph, had occurred a greater one. His wife had caught cold and died in the month of April last, and he was left a widower in London. My mother's first impulse was to go and keep house for him—to take herself and willow into the City of London once more. She wrote, making the offer, and the reply balked the motherly intention.

“I am going to retire from business,” he said, “and shall take furnished apartments a little way out of town. If I haven't saved much money, still a little contents me, and I have learned to live on a little.”

The last part of his assertion was true enough, but the veracity of the preceding remarks might be open to doubt from friends and acquaintances of Joseph Gear. Still, it did not affect us : we did not want to borrow any money of him, though he might have feared the possibility of the oc-

currence, and have prepared his ground accordingly. Heaven forgive me!—I was always suspecting that brother, whose head was so much “shrewder” than my own.

My mother shed a few tears over Joseph's loss, as she would have shed tears over the loss of any stranger who had called attention to the fact in the first column of the *Times*; but Joseph's wife had not been a woman to love us, or be loved by us, and, at least, we did not feel one friend the less. I, who had just married, could realize the fact of the awful sense of loneliness which my brother must experience, and wrote to him a letter of sympathy with his position.

In his answer he agreed with me that it was very lonely, and that only he could estimate the acuteness of his harrowed feelings, and that my letter had cost him twopence, the sympathy being extended over two sheets, and above the half ounce for which I had paid.

We heard no more of Joseph Gear after that—he had never been a regular correspondent.

From Ellen my mother received news more frequently; once a week a letter reached her—consequently reached me—from Nettlewood House. We learned the news by these means, such news

as Ellen felt disposed to give us. She was always happy and content—Herbert made her the best of husbands—a little less studious and less fond of his book, perhaps, would have made him more companionable now and then—but life passed pleasantly, and there was nothing to regret.

Every week that news, varied a little by the method of communicating it, but implying ever the same facts, my mother always bringing me the letter to read to her, Ellen writing a dashing hand, that certainly verged, at times, on “sweet illegibility,” and was hard for my mother, who liked round hand best, to decipher.

“What a blessing it is, she’s so comfortably settled,” my mother would remark every time a letter was read to her; “thank the Lord, to think she is so happy!”

My wife looked at me inquiringly after she had gone, but I did not offer to discuss the subject. Why should I have any doubt as to that happiness, of which she boasted, which she seemed anxious to impress upon us by her constant, almost strange reiteration. Neither she nor her husband asked us ever to visit them, or came to visit us—they were contented together, perhaps, and their marriage was not of long duration yet. As

the days went by, we should all be more sociable together!

All this by way of preface before the second act of a romance which we believed had died out, began in that summer time to which I have alluded.

It was a bright morning at the end of June, when a visitor arrived at our cottage on the outskirts of Keswick. I was leaving home to proceed to the office in High Street, and Mary had accompanied me as far as the wicket gate, when a two-horse Clarence stopped in the roadway twenty feet below us.

"Ellen and Herbert," said my wife at once; "they have thought of us at last."

She came down the sloping path to the high road, leaning on my arm; meanwhile a footman had left the coachman's side, opened the carriage door, and was assisting out with difficulty the visitor, when we arrived.

The visitor was a lady in a yellow tuscan bonnet with amber plumes—a feeble lady, who fell forwards into the footman's arms as the door opened, and very carelessly brought the crutched handle of a stick she was carrying against the footman's forehead; an old lady, who was lifted out, and

who hooked herself adroitly on to the arm of the footman aforesaid—a tall man, whose eyes were watering very much just then.

Mary clutched my arm impetuously.

"Mrs. Ray!" she whispered.

"Certainly a lady we did not expect, Mary, or whose company we have been anticipating," I remarked.

"Oh! I am sorry she has come! I always feared her, Canute—I am sure she brings bad news."

"Courage, my wife, we have lost our nervousness these six months."

"I shall be always strong with you," she answered; "I will not believe even in the bad news yet awhile."

"No—why should you?"

Mrs. Ray and her escort came face to face with us. I had expected her daughter to follow from the carriage, but Mrs. Ray was unaccompanied.

"Good morning t'ye both—I hope you're not very sorry to see an old friend for once."

"You are welcome, Mrs. Ray," I said.

"Thankee—I thought I might be. Do you live up that hill there—you two?"

"Yes."

"Good Lord! what a place. Let me get in and sit down. Keep me up, John, and not stand there feeling your forehead—what's the matter with you?"

"It's the sun, marm—and that stick," he added, more resentfully.

"Go on, go on, and don't stand chattering there. There never was a man who talked so much, and knew his place so little."

Mrs. Ray and her footman preceded us up the slope, Mrs. Ray discoursing all the way, and looking round at us, as that ghastly face had looked over her shoulder at me so many times when I was lodging at the Ferry Inn.

"I thought I'd like to see how you two were a-getting on," she said; "you ring-doves, that loved each other so much. Oh! this hill—I'll never come again as long as I live, mind you."

My wife looked up at me and laughed, when Mrs. Ray's back was turned; a very gorgeous back, consisting of a white china-crape shawl, with elaborate embroidery, beneath which was a green silk dress, just a trifle too short, disclosing silken-clad malformations.

"I—I haven't come from Nettlewood to-day," she remarked, in short windy puffs, as her breath

became more laboured during the ascent ; “ stayed at a friend’s half way—my friend, the Justice’s. Hold up, John. Justice Cofferton, whose daughters used to think so much of themselves—you know ’em, Mrs. Gear?”

“ Oh ! yes,” replied my wife.

“ Drabs of gals, I call ’em—proud and gawky, and time-sarving. I allus did—hate—time-sarving people. Hold up, John, do.”

“ I ham !” cried the exasperated John.

The old lady was safely landed in the parlour at last ; she made a dash at the first chair, and sat fanning herself with her lace handkerchief.

“ I shall be better in a minute—it’s them palpitations that fluster me so. You can go, John, and cover the horses up. We don’t want anything the matter with them through *your* carelessness.”

John departed, and we sat down in *our* “ best room,” and awaited the recovery of Mrs. Ray’s breath. It was a long time returning to her, or appearing to do so, and the sharp grey eyes wandered about the room, taking stock of its contents. After a while they settled upon my wife.

"You're none the wus, Mrs. Gear," Mrs. Ray commented.

"No," with a musical laugh; "I am all the better, Mrs. Ray."

"I thought it might be so, but I was curious-like. And you have altered, surely. Why, you can't be unhappy!"

"Unhappy with this home, and this dear, loving husband, who spoils me by giving me my own way too much!" she cried, impetuously.

"Um!" remarked Mrs. Ray, "it's genewin, but it's rather sickening. It's hardly what I expected, considering what a miserable woman you was."

"Your daughter is well, I hope?" I said, making an effort to turn the conversation.

"Well—oh! yes—but a comfort to me or herself,—oh! no. She don't seem to vally the rightful position we okkepy at last; she's not grateful to me for making a lady of her, and giving her a governess to polish her up as fast as possible. The money that I've spent on her—good gracious! The money that she'll come into some day, if she behaves herself—dear, dear!"

"Let us hope at least that you enjoy the change, Mrs. Ray."

"I should have 'joyed it better, if I had been

sarved more fairer," she answered, sharply; "I was done out of the old house clean, somehow. That man mixed up matters, and stirred 'em round and round, till the deuce hisself couldn't tell which was fair and which was downright swindling. If he ain't feathered his nest nicely, and bothered that foolish old secutor, I'm clean daft!"

"Let me remind you that you are speaking of Mrs. Gear's brother," I said.

"Oh! I know who I'm speaking about," she responded; "and Mrs. Gear knows him better than I do, though she says so little, and keeps so much about him under lock and key. You don't know half that she knows of that man, sir."

Mary's face flushed crimson, and then became deadly white—she wrung her hands silently together in her lap.

"Ain't that true, Mrs. Gear?" said this disagreeable old woman.

"Canute and I never speak of the past, or of all that made me unhappy therein."

"Oh! Canute and you are a wonderful pair!" sneered the old lady; "what an ornament you two would make under a glass shade in my drawing-room. I like large ornaments."

I looked at my watch, as a hint to Mrs. Ray that time was precious. But she was in no hurry to begone; on the contrary, began to unfasten her bonnet strings, and loosen her crape shawl.

"Mind you," she said, beginning with her favourite phrase, "Herbert Vaughan's ony done what I should have done in his place, and he's done it well, too. It may be aggravating, but I bear it, and am friends with him. If he opens a new lead mine with Mad Wenford, and nobody can't fathom where the money comes from, it's all the more creditable to the way in which he's *wropped* it up."

The old woman was a satirist; she stung you with words it would have been absurd to take offence at.

"Opened a lead mine!" said Mary.

"Yes—he and that lout have bought the Nettleswood Crag as a speculation—ha! ha! ha! they're going to make their fortunes now. Your first husband hankered arter that crag, and thought there was no end of metal in it, Mrs. Gear; but he was of a cautious nature, like his sister, and didn't care to venture."

"Yes, he was a cautious man," said Mary, with a perceptible shiver; "and the lead mine," she

added, hastily, "has it begun yet? Tell me more about that, please?"

"I don't know anything about it—it's no business of mine. If it fails—which I think it will—I shan't break my heart. But this isn't what I come here for, Mr. Gear."

She shifted her chair ingeniously from the window across the room to my side without rising. A similar feat, to save the necessity of getting up, I had seen her carry out with success at the Ferry Inn.

"That new house you built, Mr. Gear, isn't to my taste."

"Indeed!"

"It's all askew-like, and there isn't one room big enough to swing a cat in, much less to see your friends and give them welcome. And I'm going to see such lots of friends soon. I haven't had much fun for my money yet awhile, and Letty gives me the horrors and the creeps. So I want the drawing-room, that looks on the old shop and the old Ferry, made twice as big. And there's other alterations, and you must come and see to 'em, Mr. Gear. If I have a friend in business, I like to give him a turn," she added, patronizingly.

This was a business order, to which I had an

objection, but which, neither for my partner, nor my own sake, I had a right to refuse. Mary looked at me, and failing to attract my attention, broke in with—

“Oh! Canute, you will not go back to Nettlewood again?”

“My dear girl, have I a right to refuse?”

“Is it worth while?—is it necessary?”

“It'll come to a good deal of money, I'm told,” said Mrs. Ray; “you oughtn't to be too independent. And if you're afeard to be here all alone for a week or two, Mrs. Gear, why, there's good lodgings at the Ferry Inn. At least there was when I kep it.”

“Oh! may I come with you, Canute?”

“If you will. If there be any necessity for a long stay there. But we will talk of this presently.”

“Ah! don't take up people's time by a lot o' nonsense now. There's my horses catching cold in their insides all this time I'm waiting here. But, but,” looking very anxiously towards my wife, “I think I'd come with him and bring your best dress with you. There'll be a rare house-warming when the room's done; Letty's ‘coming out,’ as the governess calls it—as if she hadn't been a-coming

out—hot and strong—all her blessed life! Yes, yes,” with a stamp of her stick on the floor, “we shall have a grand party when the room’s done, and there’ll be a crowd of fine people to attend the old woman’s feast, much as they turned their noses up when I was poor.”

“Did I turn up mine?” asked my wife with a smile.

“You hadn’t sperit enough—you were kep down under your brother’s thumb, and hadn’t a soul of your own. But you didn’t laugh at me, and you I shall be glad to see of all ’em—you and this arti-cheeting chap. When’ll you come?” she asked, turning suddenly to me—“to-morrow?”

“I must consult Mr. Sanderson, Mrs. Ray.”

“Bother Mr. Sanderson,” she ejaculated; “you must come to-morrow—I want the room done at once—I who am old and feeble can’t afford to waste time.”

“I think I may promise to visit Nettlewood to-morrow, then.”

“I rely upon you,” said she, shifting her way back to the window, which she flung wide open and screamed through for John.

“That man’s a caterpillar I should like to

scrunch!" she said vindictively as John came dawdling up the slope again.

"Are you going now, Mrs. Ray?" asked my wife.

"Yes, yes—my friend the Justice will wonder where I've got to. If you had a glass of good old port in the house, I'd drink your health in it."

"I beg pardon," said Mary, hastily, "I had forgotten. Canute, dear, there is a bottle of port wine in the house, I think."

"Hark to that!" cried Mrs. Ray, "a woman who keep her cellar of wines, and now don't know if there's a bottle in the house. Woman," almost fiercely, "you must feel the change more than your looks show."

"I feel that the change has been for the better."

"That you wouldn't go back to the old life?" said Mrs. Ray.

"Not for all the wealth that lies hidden in the Cumberland mountains," she cried warmly; "not for all the money in the world!"

"You're a strange woman—you were allus strange," muttered Mrs. Ray.

By this time I had disinterred my bottle of wine from the cellaret, and had poured out a glass of port for Mrs. Ray.

"Here's wishing you health, young people. Here's thanking you for bearing an old woman no malice for stepping atween you and your riches. You don't hate me, Mary Gear, in your heart?" she asked, pausing with the glass to her lips.

"Why should I hate you?" asked my wondering wife.

"I am a ghost of the old life you dread so much to return to—I may have sought to harm you in it for your money's sake, or wished you harm for my own. Say forgiven—everything!"

She leaned forwards on her stick with intense eagerness—she held her breath for Mary Gear's reply.

"Forgiven," said my wife lightly, "to be sure—everything that you think requires forgiveness from the depths of my new and glad heart."

The old woman drank her wine off in one gulp like a dram-drinker.

"Here's luck to this couple—they shan't say any more in Nettlewood that I wish everybody harm. Now, John," taking the footman's arm as he entered, "look where you're going, and *do* hold up better."

"Can I be of any assistance, Mrs. Ray?" I inquired.

"Oh! no. John knows my step best—good day to you."

Outside the house, and proceeding down the hill, the sallow face slowly turned and looked back at us.

"To-morrow from my window I shall be watching Nettlewood Ferry all day," she said; "don't forget!"

CHAPTER II.

THE OLD BATTLE-GROUND.

A LITTLE consultation with my partner and my wife settled the matter. Mr. Sanderson thought it was business to accept Mrs. Ray's offer, and I, who had an inventor's horror of a stranger's improvements, became more inclined every instant to undertake and superintend the alterations of Mrs. Ray's mansion. It was the first complete plan that had ever been realized of mine; it had brought me a partner; it had been the means of bringing to my side the dearest wife in the world—I had an affection for that house.

Mary listened to all that my partner and I had to urge, and finally broke in with :

"But I am to go to Nettlewood. Under any circumstances, and in the face of any difficulties, you must let me go with you."

"The place never agreed with you, Mary."

"Anywhere and everywhere will agree with me now—I can't be left alone in Borrowdale," said Mary. "Will you not side with me, Mr. Sanderson?"

"Am I such a sinful man as to attempt to part husband and wife?" he answered.

My fear was for Mary's health in Nettlewood, and for past associations disturbing her mind somewhat. She was brave now, and feared nothing with me. So it was arranged that we should start for Nettlewood very early on the following morning, and that during our absence my mother should look after our cottage now and then.

"If you're very long away I shall come in search of you," said my mother; "I have a good excuse in my anxiety to see Ellen, who seems to have forgotten her poor mother. And another excuse in my new daughter, who, for more reasons than one, I hope will be very careful of herself."

Mary blushed, and promised to be very careful, as though I should not have been very careful of her, especially at that time. In four or five more

months, were we not both looking forward to a brighter life than we had yet experienced?—to a well-spring of gladness in a child that should add joy to our home? Everything lay fair before us in the future, when we set forth for Nettlewood—the shadows that had haunted us, and were born of fever fancies, did not daunt our progress, or approach more near to waking life when we were in the Vale again.

We crossed the Ferry at eight in the evening, Mary and I. It was not dark at that hour in the long June twilight; the stars were glittering but feebly in the grey sky above our heads; behind the western chain of mountains, the faint glow of the sunset was reflected yet.

Jabez's man rowed us across in the small ferry-boat. Jabez, proprietor of the Ferry Inn, smoked his pipe on the Nettlewood side of the lake, and watched our arrival with his hands in his pockets. All was very still that summer evening; only the splash of the oars disturbed the silence; there was a dead hush in the Vale, not a leaf on the few trees near the inn was rustling—all was steeped to the lips in peaceful rest. For a moment I glanced towards my wife, sitting by my side in the ferry-boat. Already my awakened fancy suggested

that the face was paler, and that a faint reflex of its old anxious looks had stolen there already.

"How still!" she whispered, meeting my glance.

"It is a lovely evening!" I said; "I have never seen the Vale more beautiful."

"Yes—it is beautiful," she responded, in an absent manner.

The past—that which we had abjured—would come back—would steal from the silence and meet her at the Ferry. It was not possible—afterwards I knew it was not natural—that all should be forgotten, when the first view of the old home brought back in all its vividness the old melancholy life.

"You are tired, Mary—the journey has been too much for you," I said.

"I shall be better presently. My head aches just a little now."

Something in my looks appeared to suggest that I had begun to doubt the propriety of bringing her to Nettlewood. She roused herself and looked more bright.

"Don't be afraid that my nerves will give way ever again," she said; "by your side, dear Canute, I am always strong!"

We reached the Nettlewood side of the Ferry. Jabez pulled his forelock respectfully, and bade us welcome, as old friends, as proprietors of the Ferry Inn, which he rented of us for sixteen pounds a year.

"All well here, Jabez?" I inquired.

"All well, sir."

"And business?"

"Just about as slack as ever, thankee, sir. We've one towrist in the house, or one something, I don't exactly make out."

"Then the old 'best room' is occupied, Jabez?"

"No, he won't have a best room—he keeps to one bed-room, and the tap-room. He don't spend a—oh! here he is!"

Through the door of the Ferry Inn came, at a slow pace, the diminutive form of my brother, looking a very black spot on the landscape in his widower's mourning.

"Joseph!" I exclaimed.

He came towards us at a somewhat increased pace—when he was close upon us, I could see that his face was paler and more lined than I had ever noticed it. Was there something in the Nettlewood air that made people old before their time, I wondered?

"I heard you were coming," he said; "how d'ye do?"

We shook hands together.

"This is your wife—Mrs. Zitman that was," turning to Mary; "I hope you're well, ma'am?"

My wife replied that she was very well, and looked at me for an introduction, or an explanation.

"This is my brother, Joseph Gear, Mary," I said; "an unexpected friend to find located in the Vale here."

"I was thinking of writing to you, Canute," he said, with a laboured sigh, "but I haven't had the heart to write to anybody yet. I've sold the business—I—I hadn't the heart to carry it on. She was a great loss to me—you don't know how I miss her."

"I can imagine that the blow was a heavy one, Joseph."

"I've come here for change of air and scene, hearing you speak of Nettlewood so much."

"I hope the change will do you good, Mr. Gear," my wife remarked.

"Thank you. I hope so. I don't feel very much cheered yet by the change—it's rather quiet after living in Cheapside. How's mother?"

"Very well, thank you. And Ellen—whom you have seen, I suppose?" I asked.

"Ye—es, I have seen her. She's well and in excellent spirits," he added, his brows contracting a little, I fancied, with an unpleasant reminiscence; "I have never seen her in better spirits. How do you think I'm looking, Canute?"

"Paler than usual."

"Less robust now?"

"No," surveying his slender proportions, "I think not."

"The landlord weighs me every morning—there's a falling off somewhere. I'm not what I used to be—I who used to have no nerve at all, or be all nerve, am now as nervous as a kitten. Do you think this place agrees with everybody?"

"I cannot say," I said, dubiously; "I would not stop here, Joseph, if I doubted it. Cross the ferry, take a mountain car to Borrowdale, and see the mother whose heart yearns for a glimpse of you."

"Thank you—yes, I will soon, perhaps. I've—I've promised Ellen to stay a week or two in the neighbourhood."

"I should have thought they might have found room for you at the House," I remarked, with some

honest English scorn at the want of hospitality exhibited.

Joseph began to shiver.

"Oh! lor, I wouldn't stay there for the world!" he said.

"The place even deters him!" I could see written on the curious face of my wife, but I fancied it was more likely to be Herbert Vaughan and his ways, than Nettlewood House and the gloom that hung over it.

We proceeded to the Ferry Inn—at the gate, Joseph branched off.

"I'm going for a little stroll—I shall see you again," he said, before he departed down the green lane.

A substantial tea was awaiting us at the Ferry Inn. Mrs. Ray had called that morning on Jabez, and assured him that my wife and I were certain to appear in the course of the day, and Jabez had prepared accordingly.

Every one in Nettlewood had expected us, it appeared—on the tea-table were two little notes for us—one from Mrs. Ray, the second from my sister Ellen.

The former presented the compliments of Mrs. Ray to Mr. Canute Gear, and trusted that the

fatigue of the journey would not prevent her having the pleasure of seeing him that evening—the latter was dashed off in the old hasty style:—

“DEAR CANUTE,—Don’t forget us all at Nettlewood House. Alone to-night.

“Your affectionate sister,

“NELLIE.”

“Alone to-night!” cried Mary, leaping to her feet; “I will go to her at once.”

“Patience, my dear,” said I, exerting my husband’s authority; “you are already fatigued from the effects of your long journey, and I will have no extra labour entailed on you to-night.”

“Herbert is away, and she is alone, Canute,” said my wife. “Oh! I know what it is to be all alone in that house! All its noises, its dark passages, and figures flitting in them that may be servants or spectres, you are in doubt which—the echoes that reverberate therein when a door slams or a something falls. She will feel very dull and desolate there.”

“She is not a nervous woman, Mary. You must remember that, at least.”

"You will have to proceed to the Rays on business—will you go on to Nettlewood House, Canute, and spend half an hour with Ellen?"

"And leave *you* all alone?"

"Oh! I have so much to do. The big port-manteau, where all my fine things are crumpled, to unpack—the room to arrange after my own fashion, and make it so like home, that you will not know it on your return. And if your brother Joseph come back, I shall have to seek him out, and learn from him all those faults and failings which you have hidden so carefully from me."

"Or which you will not see, Mary," I added.

Mary laughed—we were both in excellent spirits, and she was very solicitous that I should call on Ellen after my visit to the Rays; so I promised to see Ellen that night, and after tea hurried away. Ellen and I had not had a chance of a *tête-à-tête* since her marriage.

I proceeded at once to Mrs. Ray's house. My creation was finished then, and in that fair summer night, with the moon that had risen shining on it, I was proud of my work. I was backing a little to survey it at a different angle, when I backed against brother Joseph coming down the lane.

"What, Joseph!—have you been to Ellen's?"

"Not to-night. I have been walking to the head of the Vale, and then have just given Mrs. Ray a call."

"Mrs. Ray!"

"I thought it was but common politeness, as she only arrived here this afternoon."

"Do you know Mrs. Ray?"

"Ellen introduced me last week. A charming, gossiping lady, with a flow of humour that cheers me up at times."

"You surprise me!"

"I don't see anything to be surprised at," said he a little warmly, "what do you mean?"

"Your favourable opinion of Mrs. R. surprises me, just a little," I said, laughing; "she don't hit everybody's fancy exactly. Good night, Joseph."

"Oh! good night," he said tetchily.

Proceeding up the garden, I felt compelled to laugh again at the oddity of brother Joseph's manner—at the unreasonableness of a suspicion more odd still that seized me then. It had its humorous side, but it had its stern side also, and *that* sobered me. But after all, it was only a suspicion, and need not disturb me yet, even if I considered it my business to be ever troubled with it at all.

The house was very dark and dull. From all the windows fronting the carriage-road there shone not one glimmer of light—looking towards it a few minutes since from the Ferry Inn, had but shown me as lustreless a side turned towards the sleeping water. To my summons, a man-servant appeared.

“Mrs. Ray was within—was my name Gear?—would I please to follow him?”

To my surprise, we went downstairs to the ground-floor—to a large room a little apart from the household offices. This I had intended for a housekeeper's room, but Mrs. Ray evidently had a different opinion of its appropriateness.

“Mr. Gear,” the servant announced.

There was a fire burning in the grate that evening, despite the mild summer air without—there were two figures before it that might, but for the difference in their dress, have been the figures I had left, six months ago, in their old positions before the kitchen fire in the Ferry Inn. Nothing was changed but the light silk dress of the mother, the dark silk dress of the daughter. One chair was planted in full front of the fire, and Mrs. Ray sat there, with her two thin hands outspread in her usual fashion—on a low seat at the side, clutching her chin after the old habit, sat Letty Ray, staring

as thoughtfully at the red coals as though the future were still as hard to guess therein as when fortune had not deigned to smile upon her. More, it was the old face, grave and stern, with its intensity of thought; cold and hard with its repellent handsomeness.

Mrs. Ray's head moved without her body, in that peculiar manner which practice had rendered most convenient to her.

"Glad to see you, Mr. Gear," she said; then added, "Letty, here's Mr. Gear, the artichect—where's all the manners you've been larnt lately?"

"I am glad to see him," said Letty, rising at this reproof—"I hope you are well and happy, sir."

"Both, Miss Ray."

"That's proper—that's nice," croaked the old lady, "Miss Ray's the proper word now!"

"I have not grown so proud, but that I would prefer to be called Letty by an old friend, sir," she said; "I hate to be Miss Ray'd about."

"You hate everythink that I knows on," grumbled her mother, "or that I cares for! Upon my word, sir," dropping her voice to a feeble whine, "she hasn't improved a bit."

"Your wife is well and happy, too, Mr. Gear?" asked Letty.

"Thank you—I am glad to say that she is well and happy now."

"She deserves it—she is a good woman," murmured Letty, "and good women are scarce in Nettlewood."

"Indeed!" I answered.

The remark was a strange one, and elicited a strange tone in my reply, which she noticed.

"At least I think so," she added; "but I am a poor innkeeper's daughter, and am not supposed to have much powers of perception. In all my life, to my thinking, I have known but one good woman here."

"Ah! you've knowed a mighty lot—you have!" commented the mother; "if you'd only know a little better all that I keep paying such a blessed sight of money for, it'd be more satisfactory. Take a seat, Mr. Gear—have you done the plans?"

"Done them, Mrs. Ray! I scarcely know what alterations you intend to make yet."

"Didn't I say I wanted a big drawing-room, and a large libery, and a new room over the

libery, where I can shut myself in when I'm inclined to study a bit?"

"I do not think you mentioned all those alterations, Mrs. Ray."

"I don't think you took much trouble to listen to them," she snapped. "Letty, pull that bell till somebody comes. Keep on pulling—they'll larn then to move a little faster in this house."

When the servant appeared, Mrs. Ray asked for a chamber-candlestick, which being produced in due course, she said,

"Show the rooms to Mr. Gear, Letty—my legs won't keep me up to-night. You know all that I want."

"Yes."

"Show him over the best rooms, Letty, and let him look at the furnitur. He won't find such hansom' cheers in Nettlewood, or half as much gold about 'em. We live down here when we don't expect company, Mr. Gear, because there's no occasion to wear things out too soon. Look alive, Letty, I'm very tired with my journey."

Letty and I departed—Letty leading the way. We went direct to the drawing-room, handsomely furnished enough, but aflare with gilding and

ormolu, and painted velvet chairs and couches. Nothing anywhere of a neutral tint, of a soft shading, for the eye to seek relief in.

"This is our best room now," she said, with a curling lip; "see what money can do!" she added, unconsciously quoting from old Brome.

"Are you tired of the money already, Letty, or disdainful of the new position to which it has raised you?"

"Perhaps it *is* better," she said; "I haven't much time to think about it—I don't regret the past, if I can't see anything very bright before me. Nothing ahead of me, Mr. Gear," said she, "like that which you once prophesied for me."

"The days are early yet."

"Sometimes I feel that we are robbers here, Mr. Gear—at other times, that we are only in possession of our rights. But then my mind is always on the change, and I am never two days alike. I was a gloomy disappointed woman when you knew me first, and in this new estate I cannot set that character aside. But I am trying," she cried, flinging back her head disdainfully, "I am learning to be proud!"

I was admiring her new manner then, the haughty carriage, the handsome face and figure.

With much of her past brusqueness, there was still something of the new estate refining and subduing her. She would learn to be a lady in good time, I saw.

"You perceive how to enlarge this room without spoiling the general design?" she asked.

"Yes—I think so."

"This way then."

I knew the way as well as Letty Ray about the house—every turning in the mansion had been my study, and had not grown indistinct yet.

We went over the best rooms, as Mrs Ray had desired—beyond the dining-room, it struck me that a library might be extended, and a new room built above it, as suggested by the proprietress. Returning to the housekeeper's room, Letty said suddenly,

"Have you seen your sister yet?"

"I am going to her house in a few minutes. You see her now and then, I presume?"

"We are neighbours—she and her husband visit here occasionally, Mr. Gear," in a manner still more abrupt than I had noticed hitherto; "I don't like your sister."

"You are the first person who has ever said so, I believe," I said, a little coldly.

"I am a plain woman," she answered, "and do not shrink from a plain confession. I have tried more than once to show her my antipathy, but she beats it down in some way, whilst she is here. When she is gone, I dislike—hate her worse than ever!"

"Why do you tell me this?"

"I don't know—I feel that I should be a hypocrite, if I were to profess a love for her I did not feel. I have a hope that you will tell her this, and that she may understand me better. That's all."

"And her husband—do you hate him too, for her sake?"

Her hand went hastily to her bosom, as though I had stabbed her there—those great dark eyes flashed fire at me.

"Do I hate him?" she repeated; "why do you say that to me?"

"I thought it might be possible."

"Well—yes—I *hate him too!*"

She set her white teeth together, and spoke through them, but there was hesitation in her answer, and it had required some reflection before it was hissed forth. Back to the surface of the stream, to the depths of which it had been long submerged, came an old suspicion to my brain.

On the old battle-ground the ghosts were rising to war again with every sober thought.

"Let us return," she said, with a little shiver ;
"unless you have any more questions to ask me ?"

"Not any."

"May I ask you one ?"

"Certainly."

"What brought your brother to Nettlewood ?"

I was doubtful how to answer this—if I even had the power to answer.

"I know what keeps him here," she said ; "but what brought him to a place like this ?"

"A wish for change of air and scene, he tells me—I had spoken of Nettlewood to him more than once."

"He tells you," catching at my words; "then you doubt him ?"

"No, no — why should I doubt my own brother ?"

"I doubt him," said Letty ; "I doubt the motive that brings him hither. He is a sordid wretch, who would sell his soul for money—I shall have to tell him so presently."

"Has he fallen in love with you, Letty ?" I asked.

"With me!" she cried disdainfully, "such a man as that insult me by a thought! If he dared, I would strike him, I think."

"You don't mean—surely you don't mean—"

"I mean that he is playing a shallow part here, and that my mother sees it as clearly as I do, and laughs at him when his back is turned. Tell him so!"

"I think I will," I said reflectively.

"Are there any more of you Gears?" she asked after this.

"Only my mother."

"You are the most contrary people whom I ever remember to have met. What makes you so different from your brother and sister?"

"Perhaps there is no difference," I remarked.

"You I can take to—you, I once thought, was the very man fitting for a brother to me—one I could tell my troubles to, and feel strengthened by his kind advice, his brother's love. But the rest of you!"

She stamped her foot impatiently on the stone landing-place outside the housekeeper's room, where she had paused to make that last remark before entering. Mrs. Ray was waiting for us in a spirit as impatient as her daughter's.

"What a time you've been!" she said; "what have you been talking about? Me?"

"No," said Letty.

"Well, the alterations. If you'll do the drawing-room first, we'll have the house-warming at once. The libery won't want warming much, at any time."

"You shall see my rough plan to-morrow, Mrs. Ray."

"Thankee. You won't stay supper, of course?"

"No, thank you. I have a visit to pay."

"To your sister?"

I replied in the affirmative.

"Ah! she's a nice gal—there's style there which Letty won't imitate, though she can take off some people that nobody wants her to, fast enough. There's life in Mrs. Vaughan—she makes the best of everything, and keeps the worst of it at home. She's a woman you may well be proud of, Mr. Gear."

This assurance, so distinct from her daughter's, pleased me. It was the truer criticism—and strangely enough, more frank and genuine than Letty's. Had setting Ellen up for a model offended Letty Ray, and turned her against my sister?—or was there something deeper and more

antagonistic that Letty knew and kept to herself, and brooded over along with those other thoughts which lay hidden in the fire she studied so much?

CHAPTER III.

NELLIE.

It was close upon ten o'clock when I was under the portico of Nettlewood House. I might have turned and gone home, preferring a more rational hour for visiting next day, had I not promised my wife to call upon Ellen that night. Besides, Ellen was alone, and I was anxious to see her without a witness—see her as my sister, not as Herbert Vaughan's wife.

Janet admitted me into the hall, and flung up her arms at recognizing me.

"The young Measter Gear!" she cried; "ye're welcome—she'll be glad to see ye here."

"Did not you expect me, Janet?"

"Na—does she?"

"I believe so. A letter was left for me at the 'Ferry Inn.'"

"She's a lady that does na talk muckle to her sarvants, or trust in 'em muckle," said Janet, in a husky whisper; "this stranger's mair bold, mair able to tak her ain part here against—against the things that haunt a hoose sic as this. It dinna matter to sic as me," she said thoughtfully, "I canna expect to win upon the luve o' the stranger, can I?"

"I believe you will, Janet."

"I ha'e gaen up tryin'," said she wearily; "but the young meestress—my dear young meestress that war? Say she's weal and bricht, as her young life desarved."

"She is. You will be surprised to see how much she has altered for the better."

"I knew the lassie wud. Where be she, sir?"

"At the 'Ferry Inn.'"

"I'll gang and see her the nicht, if the new meestress will allow me," said Janet; "mayhap ye'll stay an hoor here?"

"It is more than likely."

"She's all alane. The master—Lord bless him

—will be hame the morrow. Well, what do ye want?”

This was addressed to James Bains, whose pock-marked countenance loomed ominously at us from round a pillar.

“I thought the door had not been answered,” he grumbled. “Oh!” catching sight of me, “good evening to you, sir, I hope your honour is well.”

“Quite well, thank you.”

“Ye can gae noo, James, and be thankfu’ for the gude news ye’ve heard,” said Janet, just a trifle sarcastic; “this wa’, Mr. Gear. I’ll show ye to Mrs. Vaughan.”

Along the corridor, preceded by Janet, as in the old days when my love was unavowed, and my heart thrilled at the solitariness of the fair widow’s life. Did I ever think then of threading those passages in search of Ellen?

“Hark!” said Janet, holding up one hand for me to pause, “that be na like the auld times, Measter Gear.”

Some dance-music dashed off on the piano welled into the passages and filled the place with harmony—even then the music was not inspiring, and the far-away echoes that it roused sounded in the distance like vain murmuring.

"Music dinna agree vera weel with the auld hoose," said Janet, as though a similar impression had struck her; "it's oot o' place a bit. I like the solemn music best frae *her*—it seems mair natural. That's it!"

With a suddenness that was a little startling, the dance-music drifted away into a Requiem of Mozart's—a favourite piece of Ellen's before her marriage lines were written.

"*She* war a gude player too afore she last a' heart for play here," said Janet, "but yer sister is better, and keeps at it weel when he's awa."

"Is he often away?"

"Na—na," she said quickly, put upon her guard by my inquiry, "not sae often as in the auld days—ony when compelled by beesiness."

She turned the handle of the door, and announced me. I entered. Ellen rose from the piano, and clasped me in her arms.

"My dear Canute, I am so glad to see you!"

The first warmth of her greeting ended, she asked me several questions about her mother and my wife—their health and peace of mind, &c.—when she detected Janet still standing at the door.

"You can go, Janet," she said quickly.

"I am waitin' to ask ye a favour, Mistress Vaughan."

"Well—what is it?"

"My young mistress that war is at the Ferry Inn—will ye spare me for an hoor to see her, please?"

"You may go to-morrow."

"To-morrow the master wull be back, and may want me."

"Ah! I had forgotten—the master must not find you missing from your post. Yes—you can go now."

Janet thanked her, and retired. Ellen looked up at me, and laughed.

"And if you never come back again," addressing the door which had closed on Janet, "it will not be Meestress Vaughan," imitating Janet's hard accent, "that will break her heart."

"Do you not like Janet?" I asked.

"I never like people whose ways are incomprehensible to me, and who are officious in intruding when you have a wish to be alone," said Ellen; "no," after a moment's reflection, "I don't like her at all."

"Judging from the past affection between my

wife and her, I should have fancied that Janet would have constituted herself quite a humble friend of yours by this time."

"Mary understood her—I can't make her out. Sometimes I feel as if I were treating her harshly and subjecting her to much unnecessary snubbing—at other times I feel as if she were a spy upon my actions, a tale-bearer of every trivial thing I do or say. But Janet is not worth wasting time about. Sit here and tell me of home—the new home where mother is!"

I took the chair indicated, and spoke of home-matters as required—of the mother's cottage near our own, and the good tidings of the willow's new lease of life in Cumberland soil. For a moment, she dashed her white hand across her eyes, and said,

"That will do, Canute. That's all a reproach to me."

"What is?"

"That lonely life of the dear mother from whom I fled, in my rash haste to come hither."

I saw her little foot rise and fall impetuously upon the carpet; I noted the heaving of the bosom of her dress, the false glitter of her eyes; in the handsome face, radiant with health as it was, I

felt my heart sink to note a faint reflex of Mary Zitman's looks.

"Ellen, you are not happy!" I cried.

"Don't say that—don't think that!" she answered; "did I not marry for love of him, and has he ever shown one sign of his old love for me fading away? I tell you that I am happy—that I shall be always happy here, Canute!"

"I am glad to hear that."

She did not like the tone of my voice, although she affected to disregard it.

"I have been told more than once that your wife's past life here was far from enviable," Ellen said; "though she had her own way, and there was little to thwart it. *That* has perplexed me—and even if the domesticities disturb one at times, it is so easy to sink them to the bottom by a brighter thought. When I feel hippped—just a little hippped—there is always some pleasurable excitement to fly to and carry off the impression. No one shall ever taunt *me* with being an unhappy woman!"

She said it almost defiantly; her manner reminded me of her past assertion to the same effect, when I had first seen her as a wife, but it was more developed now, and—it deceived me less!

Poor Ellen! The dream of love had vanished; she, ever a quick observer, had seen further into the depths of Herbert Vaughan's character than either Mary or I—I could have staked my life upon it then. Before her, a long way ahead, lay the steep uphill path of a wife's duty to a man she had been deceived in—how would she, a woman of spirit, bear up, and how far towards the journey's end? She had been a proud and unflinching girl, ever a strong one, but she must infallibly sink by the way, unless a superhuman hand supported her with the strength of its Divinity.

"I have not time to be depressed here," she said; "when Herbert is away, which is but seldom, I ride out on horseback, or sally forth on a mountain scramble in search of the picturesque. I was ever a good draftsman, if you remember, Canute. Look here."

On the table lay a little portfolio which she snatched up and opened with a hasty hand, tilting its contents on to the table and floor. There were many pencil sketches of the scenery in the neighbourhood—a few in water colours.

"There, dear old Can," she said, stooping and thrusting into my hand a sketch of Nettlewood Ferry and the "Ferry Inn," "that's where you

met your sweetheart for the first time. I have been drawing that expressly for you."

"Thank you, Nell. I shall always treasure it."

"And here—no, not here, for it's there," making a little impetuous dash at a sketch that had fluttered towards the window curtains, "is the Black Gap pass, looking down into Engerdale."

"Have you been there?"

"Several times—it's a favourite scramble of mine when the weather is fine. I know every turn of the route now, and shall set up as guide when all other professions are vain and unprofitable. Do you remember that old sheepfold between the Black and the White Gap?" she said, pointing to it on the drawing; "there it is across the river from the Black Gap side," said Ellen; "it is a ruin now, which the sheep despise even in wet weather. Keep that sketch too, Canute, if you like it."

"Also 'in memoriam,'" I said, confiscating the two drawings of Ellen's.

She had succeeded in turning the subject from the one particular topic calculated to be embarrassing, and, for her sake, I made no effort to retrace the ground and bring her back to it. It could do

no good, and it was beyond my power, scarcely my place, to follow to the end the little mystery which made all lives with Herbert Vaughan unsettled. We spoke of the good folk at Nettlewood—of the Rays, whom she professed to like because their eccentricities amused her—of Mr. Wenford, who came so often to the House now he was her husband's partner, and who also amused her in a different fashion, she said.

"He's an odd man, but his oddities are worth studying," said Ellen; "and it is so easy to rouse him to a fury which is more amusing than his oddities. The days would pass more dully here, if it were not for poor Mad Wenford."

"*Poor Mad Wenford, Ellen?*"

"I pity him, because he is a good man spoiled," said Ellen; "a good man, if you will, who has thoroughly degenerated into a bad one. He must have been an amiable fool once—now he prides himself upon a cunning that everybody can see, and a roughness that nobody seems to care for. But he is vastly amusing."

Ellen laughed in rather a heartless manner, I thought, and as the jest—if there were one—was pointless to me, I fear I returned a very sickly smile by way of response.

"He's poor Mad Wenford for a second and more literal reason," said Ellen; "he has gambled and thrown away three-fourths of a fine property, and sunk the rest in a speculation that will ruin more than him."

"The lead mine!" I ejaculated.

"I fancy so. He comes here and whispers about it long and anxiously with my husband, who is to sink or swim in a venture that I thought was foolish from the first. I told them so; but I was only a woman, whose opinion was not worth considering."

"And if it come to sinking, Nell?"

"Perhaps Herbert and I will be all the happier, taking a lesson from a certain Mary Zitman of old times. I would give ten years of my life—the next ten, which are a woman's best, I've heard—to see Herbert working on soberly and industriously for his living. He might make a fortune that way—tied by necessity to one pursuit, I believe that he would excel in it. Busied in a hundred schemes to raise himself to greatness, he will collapse, unless the tide turn very suddenly and swiftly in his favour. I see the wisdom in him of which he is so vain, but I see the weakness that has been the ruin of nobler and better men."

"What weakness is that?" said a voice close to our ears.

We both started as though we had been two conspirators plotting against the life of him who had suddenly stolen in upon us.

Vaughan laughed at our surprise, and held his hand towards me.

"Mr. Gear, I hope that I am not intruding upon any outburst of confidence on the part of Mrs. Vaughan."

"No, sir," said Ellen, answering for me with her old readiness of reply, "we were simply discussing the merits of Mr. Herbert Vaughan."

"And his reigning weakness—what was that?"

"The weakness of sinking *all and everything*," what an emphasis marked those words! "in a struggle to be rich."

"I always valued riches, Ellen—I have a great respect for them still, and the power they place in a man's hands. Mr. Gear remembers that we were nearly declaring war to the knife when he stole my sister's wealth away without enriching himself. I scarcely know if I have ever loved him since."

There was a steely glitter in his eyes I did not like—the mocking words upon his lip might have

met with a retort from me had I not seen the pained expression on Ellen's flushed face. In her eyes I read a wish that I should go at once, and I had no desire to linger there. Every time I met that man I felt towards him a greater antipathy—the gulf between us and our natures was widening every day, and no new ties of relationship could bridge it over. I distrusted him, and he read that distrust in my face more plainly each time we crossed each other's path.

I rose to go.

"I fear that I have left Mary too much alone to-night," I said.

He did not press me to stay, did not express any surprise to hear that his sister was in Nettlewood, or favour me by an inquiry respecting her health. There was a heaviness in his looks that betokened he had been crossed to-night, that he had met with ill-luck somewhere on his journey, and had brought its shadow back with him. Such feelings I knew he had the power to mask when it pleased him—as he had the power of the snake-charmer to lure and ensnare—but he did not care to disguise them on the night of his sudden return.

"You are going, Gear?" he said.

"Yes. Good night, Nellie."

"Good night. I shall see you again shortly—in so limited a world we *must* meet."

"Unless there is an interdict on meeting, which," he added, as Ellen's face flushed a deeper crimson than before, "there is not, in this case. I am always proud to see Mr. Gear—he honours this unhappy house by coming hither."

These last words were uttered as the door closed or slammed behind us, and were unheard by Ellen.

"Unhappy—unhappy," I repeated twice.

"Where is the happiness here?" he said.

"In your wife, I trust."

"Put not your trust in wives," said he scornfully; "they will fail you—they will deceive you—they will dishonour you and yours."

"What do you mean?—what do you want me to suspect?" I cried, turning upon him angrily in my turn; "man, speak out, and drop this forced air of mystery, which becomes you so ill! Have you no trust in your wife—my sister?"

"Have you been talking about her in Nettleswood yet?" he asked; "have you heard nothing?"

"Nothing, sir."

"Perhaps I am the slave of an illusion," he said moodily; "perhaps my misfortunes are softening my brain a little. I make no charge—I withdraw my remarks concerning her—I am vexed, and not myself to-night. Mr. Gear," offering me his hand, "forgive and forget this folly."

I took the hand so proffered, and he wrung it in his own a moment. Was all this acting, or was it a frank confession? I could not tell by looking into a face that expressed only what its owner wished—but I still was beset with the fancy that all this was but acting, for a purpose which in the mists around it was not easily distinguishable.

"I will try and consider it a folly—nothing more. Good night."

"Good night, Mr. Gear."

Before the door closed, I heard the piano sounding faintly from the distant drawing-room. Ellen was playing the dance-music again—mad waltz music, that, in the distance, sounded, to my awakened sense of fear, like a desperate attempt to beat off evil thoughts—a poor bravado that deceived no one save herself.

The door did not close—from the threshold of

his home Mr. Vaughan watched my departure, and perhaps sent his curses after me. I felt as though weighed down by some such evil influence as I returned to the Ferry Inn.

CHAPTER IV.

JOSEPH'S CONFESSION.

I NEED not dwell upon each day's events at Nettlewood. Fragments of a mystery floated about my path, and confused me in a vain attempt to mould them into some semblance of fact. That there was a something here, as in the early days, I was assured—that all was no more right at the great house now than then. It might be a new secret, or a part of the old, and either there was no guessing at.

My wife, who read my doubts, and whom I could not pain by constant recapitulation of a subject that unnerved me, had said, on my return that night chronicled in the preceding chapter,

"I knew that he would not make her happy—that I did not distrust or fear him in vain;" but her distrust and fear resolved themselves into generalities when I sought to gain the clue to the troubles Ellen boldly fought against. They lived in mystery at Nettlewood—its enervating atmosphere wearied and worried me. Letty Ray was as mysterious as Herbert Vaughan or Ellen—Janet, the grim servant-maid, was as impenetrable as granite, and one woman saw merit in her which another contemned and repelled—all around me was thickening, and I was merged in it and becoming lost in it. New suspicions met me at every turn—it would be better to escape them all—there would be quieter days at Borrowdale! But the quiet days were over with me—I had left them behind for ever, when the Nettlewood ferry boat bore me to the old field of action. In the whirl of events hurrying on towards me, there was no escape for me or mine!

Work had begun at Mrs. Ray's—the workmen had been mustered by my partner at Keswick, and sent over the Black Gap to me. Henlock was full of labourers again—the drawing-room alterations of the mansion were rapidly progressing. I met Herbert Vaughan about Nettlewood; I met

his partner, Mr. Wenford, a moody heavy-brained man now, whose "madness" had taken a sullen turn, from which he seldom deviated, and whose politeness to me was not particularly apparent. I was puzzled by my brother Joseph's prolonged stay at the Inn, by the friendship he appeared to have formed with my sister Ellen's husband; I was cheered alone by my wife's presence and love—and felt that it was a happy thought which had induced her to accompany me.

Ellen I saw frequently. She sought my wife out—took her for long mountain rambles—for long drives in her carriage—induced her, somewhat reluctantly, to pay Nettlewood House a visit once or twice. But Ellen was not precise in her movements—she had been ever of an impulsive disposition. The second week of our sojourn in the Vale, Ellen's visits—her taste for my wife's society, suddenly ceased, and Mr. Vaughan accounted for it to his sister by saying that she had taken offence at something Mary had said—he did not know what—woman's "tiffs" he had no time to study. Then Ellen appeared again—always with the affectation of being free from care, and evaded all explanation—finally she surprised all of us, her husband included, by disappearing for a

whole day, and returning in the twilight across the ferry.

"Canute," she said to me, who was the first to meet her, "I have crossed the Gaps to Borrowdale, and seen mother. I was urged onward to see her, and nothing could stop me—I have been an ungrateful child to her, and I yearned for her forgiveness. It has been a fine day, and I have escaped all the mists."

Herbert Vaughan had been scouring the place in search of her, and came up at this juncture on horseback.

"Where have you been, madam?" he asked, imperiously.

Ellen looked at him fixedly, and told the same story of her wanderings.

"It is sixteen miles there and back across the Gaps, and no woman could have borne the fatigue," he said.

"Do you think I would lie to you, sir?" cried Ellen, for the first time since her marriage losing her temper in my presence.

"I think that this requires searching into," he said; "and I will not rest until I have sifted it to the bottom."

"You forget yourself, Mr. Vaughan," said

Ellen ; “you forget there are witnesses here, before whom I have a right to be spared this humiliation.”

“You have no right to leave your home !” he cried, furious with passion.

“Sir, I am your wife, not your prisoner.”

“I will not have it!—from this time forth, I will not have it !”

He lashed his mare with his whip, and she curveted and pranced upon the sloping bank leading to the Ferry.

“*Home !*” he said, in a menacing tone, before he rode away.

“I am glad that you did not interfere,” said Ellen, turning to me as soon as he had gone ; “it was the wiser and the better course. There has been misfortune at the lead mine to-day—a strike of the miners, perhaps, for wages. This is an unusual storm—think no more of it.”

“Will you return at once, now that his passion is so violent ? Shall I return with you ?”

“Do you think I fear him ?” cried Ellen, proudly ; “no, let me go alone, and at once. I obey his will—when I can ascertain what it is. Good-bye, Canute. He is not so angry as he

seems, I think. It is—"her red lip betrayed itself in spite of her—"a habit at times, that verges on the histrionic. This is a little storm—to-morrow we shall have sunny weather."

And on the morrow, sure enough, Herbert Vaughan and his wife took a long ride together, with James Baines officiating as groom in the rear. There was fair weather then for days together—a break in the clouds ere they closed again.

During the progress of the alterations, I found suddenly some difficulty in getting rid of the brotherly attention of Joseph, who was interested in all improvements on the estate. He made a point of accompanying me at last every morning, and of intently studying my theory of supervision. He even stooped to flatter me, and to express his surprise at my wonderful "comprehensive abilities in matters of detail," whatever he might mean by that. Here we met Mrs. Ray very frequently, whose interest in the alterations was much greater than anybody else's.

Joseph Gear was fond of suggesting alterations when Mrs. Ray was present—his spare body danced attendance after that lady through the grounds; he was even courteous enough to offer her

his arm, and relieve John of his escort—once even slipped a piece of silver into the hands of John, who from that time forth revered my brother, and seemed to comprehend his wishes perfectly.

“I don’t know what I should do, if it were not for your brother,” said Mrs. Ray to me in Joseph’s presence—in fact when she was leaning on Joseph’s arm; “he’s so handy to hold on by; he’s allus kind and attentive, and the gentlest of creaturs. I’m afeard I trouble him very much.”

“Not by any means, my dear Mrs. Ray,” said Joseph, quite briskly.

The particular morning in which these flying compliments occurred was a damp and showery one, but Mrs. Ray had appeared in defiance of opposing elements when she had become aware of Joseph’s propinquity. In plain language, either Mrs. Ray appeared to be “setting her cap” at Joseph, or Joseph was paying Mrs. Ray an undue amount of attention—I began almost to fear that there was some little understanding between this old woman and this middle-aged man. It was an unnatural match, and showed to what strange worship a man, led by his greed for money, might reduce himself; and

from that morning I resolved to have a little talk with Joseph at the very first opportunity.

Things were proceeding too far, when John took his departure as a matter of course, and left Joseph with Mrs Ray, a silk umbrella of Brobdignagian proportions, a work-bag containing some extraordinary knitting in which Mrs. Ray indulged, and one muddy golosh on his little finger—said golosh refusing to keep on, on any pretence whatever.

“I’m afeard,” continued Mrs. Ray, “that he’s too kind on my account, and that it interferes with the business he has down here.”

“Down here for health’s sake, Mrs. Ray—solely in hope of finding some distraction for a great loss,” answered Joseph, heaving a deep sigh by way of conclusion.

“Ah! you must have been very fond of Mrs. G. to feel it so much,” remarked Mrs. Ray, with a dryness that made me smile, though it only increased the downward curves of my brother Joseph’s mouth; “you were very much attached to her?”

“Yes, I were, madam,” said Joseph, in his confusion and re-awakened grief.

“Was she very fond of you, sir?”

“Very. I did my best to make her happy—that was only my duty, Mrs. Ray.”

"Some people don't care about dooty much," was the short answer; "some people—hold up, sir—I was allus weak on my left side."

"I beg pardon," said Joseph.

"Some people talk a good deal about dooty, but don't know what it means," continued Mrs. Ray; "does it rain now, Mr. Gear?"

"I—I don't think it does."

"Then I'd put the umbereller down—it'd save worriting my feathers a good deal. Are you fond of flowers, Mr. Gear?"

"Passionately, madam."

"Ah! I ain't," said Mrs. Ray, "ony my daughter is. When she can get away from her guvness to do a bit of gardenin' she will. I think we'll go and look her up."

"Ye—es, ma'am, with great pleasure—ahem!"

Poor Joseph was led away in a direction he particularly objected to—the searching eyes of Letty Ray were too much for him, and saw through the shallow game he was playing too accurately to please him. He knew it annoyed Letty to see him enact the part of escort to Mrs. Ray, and Mrs. Ray, who was in an aggravating mood, knew that also, and hence was inclined to show off my brother that morning.

This odd couple had not left me many minutes before Letty Ray, with a rich shawl looped over her head, looking like the same Letty Ray I had seen at the Ferry the first time I entered Nettleswood, came rapidly towards me.

"Mr. Gear," she said, "I wish to speak to you."

I drew a little apart with her, and she commenced at once in an excited tone.

"I spoke of your brother when you came back about these alterations," she said imperiously; "I believe I did not impress you with *my* love for him. Shall I tell him what I think of coming here in search of money—no matter by what ends—or will you?"

"You are perfectly at liberty to address him on the subject, Miss Ray."

"I will not have it!" she cried, stamping her foot impatiently upon the ground; "this man comes to rob me of that for which I almost hate myself at times, but which shall never benefit him, I swear. This man with no soul, with no common decency, I will balk at the hazard of my birth-right, if you do not warn him to stay away from here."

"Is he bound to take my warning?" I inquired;

"do you think for an instant that I have any influence over him?"

"Then it must be left to me. I will seek him out at once."

She was turning passionately away, when I entreated her attention for one moment. I told her that I had intended to talk calmly on the subject with my brother, and begged for her own sake that she would allow me to reason with him first. I also added that it was more than probable that we were both in the dark as to the intentions of Mrs. Ray, who was a far-seeing woman, and not likely to be deceived by any false pretensions.

"She would marry to-morrow to spite me, if I offended her," cried Letty; "do not build on any rational step that she might take. She has never loved me—we have been never mother and daughter to each other."

"Perhaps there are faults on both sides—in the Ferry Inn times, I thought so."

"Did you?" she said eagerly; "and my fault—what was it?"

"The shutting up yourself—your true self—from the mother; offering no love, seeking no love from her—in your greatest trouble holding her ever from your heart."

"True enough," she said, gloomily looking down at her feet; "who would have thought a stranger could have guessed it all so well? But oh! sir, what a different girl I should have been, if she had been a different mother to me!"

She dashed hurriedly away in the direction of the house. By that step I could see that she left me to adopt my own course with Joseph Gear.

And that course?—how could it possibly avail? On the life and purposes of my brother had I, after all, a right to intrude? He was his own master, and able to judge of what was best, or most profitable for him. Still, this scheming annoyed me; this covetous grasping which he involuntarily betrayed appeared to shame me as well as him; I would at least make one effort to stay it.

Joseph Gear was certainly a mean man. More than once in the course of this story that fact has been pretty plainly exemplified. He had not begun life in a mean spirit, but the first misfortune in business appeared to have narrowed his mind, and a wife of a saving disposition had not improved it. Evidences of his "closeness" had cropped out with every step he made towards independence; he had become miserly, and, as a natural result, he had become wretched and dis-

contented. Gold was his god, and he worshipped nothing else. Before his idol he sacrificed all home affection, all love for kith and kin; further and further away from his heart we had drifted for years—it was only by a wrench of something nobler in his disposition, something that was rapidly failing him, that he approached us at uncertain intervals, and showed that we had not utterly sunk out of his best memories.

He was no favourite with my wife, whose spirit rejected anything that was covetous; even at the Ferry Inn, the ruling passion had shown itself too plainly. For economy's sake, he was living with Jabez at the back of the house; for economy's sake, he was always studying my dinner and tea hour, and hanging about the doors for an invitation; in the hope of saving a little, even in Nettlewood, he denied himself almost the common necessities of life.

Returning to the Ferry Inn, I met Mary, with a face paler than usual. It was easy to see that something had happened in my absence—I had not studied those tell-tale looks so long, that I could not read the slightest evidence of trouble on them.

“What has happened, Mary?”

"Nothing to me at least, dear," she said, "but they are quarrelling at the Inn, and I was glad to escape from it."

"Who is quarrelling?"

"Your brother and mine."

"Vaughan there!"

"He came on purpose to see your brother, and they were at high words almost directly."

"Joseph at high words is something out of the common. Surely it cannot be about Ellen, who was his favourite, if he ever had one."

"No, no—it is about the Rays, I think. I have heard the name mentioned once or twice."

"Singular," I remarked; "what have the Rays to do with Herbert Vaughan?"

We reached the Inn. The window of the tap-room was down, and the voices, still pitched to a high key, welled forth thence.

"I say again, what business is it of yours?" I heard my brother exclaim, in that shrill falsetto which accompanied all excitement on his part.

"I claim it as my business at least, and I will not have it!" answered Vaughan.

"I have not owned to it—I defy you to prove it, man."

"Still I warn you—take care!"

We entered the house at the same moment, as Herbert Vaughan opened the tap-room door.

"Here is your brother Canute," he said, pausing and looking back into the room, "shall I ask his advice upon the subject?"

"If you like," was the dogged answer.

Joseph Gear was at bay, it seemed.

"Leave them to their quarrel, dear," said my wife to me; "this cannot concern you."

"On the contrary, if this gentleman here do not take my warning, it will concern Canute Gear most of all."

I heard my brother groan within. Here was another hateful string of allusions to irritate me from this man, who seemed ever working in the dark. I resolved to dash this down at once. Whispering Mary to retire to her room, I passed into the tap-room, almost pushing Herbert Vaughan before me.

In a corner of this low-ceilinged, smoke-be-grimed apartment, my brother was seated amongst the narrow tables and forms placed there for the use of Cumberland workmen. He sat with his head against the wall, and his eyes fixed on his tormentor; he had plucked up a strange spirit to defy him.

"Brother," I said, advancing to him, "that which concerns me, I have a right to know. If you can trust him, surely you can place confidence in me?"

He looked eagerly towards me—he half rose to grasp my hand, and then sat down again.

"Some day," he murmured—"some day, perhaps."

"Shall I explain to my brother-in-law?" asked Vaughan, coolly.

"You will go now, if you are a man," said Joseph; "I am fairly beaten—I own it. What more do you want?"

"Nothing more. It is a fair confession, which I accept," he said. He turned to me.

"Mr. Gear, this is a trifling dispute between your brother and me, and ends, as it ought to do, amicably. Will you both come to Nettlewood House this evening, and show to Ellen, who doubts the fact, that there is true friendship existent in the midst of us?"

"Not to-night," feebly responded Joseph.

"In a night or two, then, when the ruffled stream has subsided again. Mary is well, I hope, Gear?"

"Very well."

"My love to her. Good day."

He left the room, and went out of the house. Joseph rose from his seat, watched him from the tap-room window, till he was fairly out of sight; watched him eagerly, with his hands clutching the window frames.

"He's gone!" he said, turning round to me; "he's gone for good. What a terrible man he is!"

He dropped into the chair beneath the window, and began rubbing up his short grey hairs with hands that trembled very much. I took a chair before the beer-stained table that divided us, and faced him.

"Does this concern Nellie?"

"No."

"Nor me?"

"Wait a moment—part of it does, part of it doesn't. Don't ask me to explain just now. There is a day coming when I can tell you more."

"I ask you to tell me now," I said firmly; "I have grown so tired of groping in the dark, that I have resolved to charge ruthlessly at all new mysteries. You are in this man's power?"

"He owes me ten thousand pounds—does it seem like it?"

"Owes you ten thousand pounds!"

"On his personal security, unfortunately," sighed Joseph, "and I don't believe he's worth ten thousand pence. There will come a day when I will ruin that man."

His hand clutched the edge of the table, which shook beneath the force with which he gripped it. If the time ever came, that would be a relentless hold on Herbert Vaughan, I thought.

"And the debtor has the upper hand of the creditor, and holds him down, and threatens him! What does that mean?"

"I daren't tell you—I haven't confidence enough in you to tell you that," he whispered, huskily.

"And yet that man——"

"That man found it out years ago."

I held my hand across the table towards him.

"Trust in me, Joseph—I will not abuse your confidence. If the secret affects me, trust me the more, and ask my advice to extricate you from the net which this man spreads on all sides, and includes all. Remember, we are children of one

mother, and that in our common trouble we should band together and fight it down."

"If I might trust you, if I might shake off the weight upon my soul," he said, affected by my warm appeal.

"If you have done wrong—which I fear you have—and it requires my help to set you right, ask for it and I will give it you. If my pardon be required—I am getting near the truth, I see—trust in the younger brother's warmth of heart to say, thy sins be forgiven thee."

He seized my hand at once.

"I will tell all," he said—"I will hold you to your word. I shall be free of that man who has haunted me so long, and nearer that revenge I prom——"

"We will not talk of revenge just now," I interrupted, sternly.

Joseph released my hand and closed the windows—went to the door and turned the key—took his place close to my side.

"You will hate me ever after this, Canute," he murmured, in a low voice, "but better your hate than that man's tyranny. I place myself in your power—but I trust in you. You remember the bankruptcy which ruined the firm?"

"Why should I forget it?"

"It was a sham bankruptcy, carefully prepared beforehand to shake off all the ties that kept me down, and all the family claims upon me. I was getting on too slowly, too much money was paid annually to mother and the rest, and I—I broke."

"My God!" I ejaculated, recoiling from him in my horror, "so bad as this!—so awfully and atrociously bad!"

Joseph edged his chair after me. A more abject picture than that man presented at that moment I never hope to see again.

"You promised me your pardon, you promised to give me your advice," he entreated; "you won't—my own brother!—turn against me now you have drawn the secret from me."

"No," I answered.

"After it had gone too far, I was sorry—my solicitor, Vaughan's father, saw first through the maze of complication, but aided me at last in the deception. We worked together, and deceived the world. I was declared bankrupt—the estate paid its few shillings in the pound, and I was free to begin again. You know what followed; I got rich, I saved money, I worked my way upwards

until this man—Vaughan's son—came to life to ruin me.”

“Ruin?”

“Ruined—only a few hundred pounds left me in the whole world, I swear to you. This man, Vaughan, in groping over his father's papers, had discovered the secret, and saw the clue to preying on me. I have been in his power ever since—he borrowed money which I dared not claim again—he extorted from me ten thousand pounds on Ellen's wedding day, her portion, that he said was legally her own, but which he promised to repay me from his sister's fortune. You know how you balked me by the marriage, and can guess the good turn which I meant that you should do me, and which we talked over in Knight Ryder Street. And now, see how it has all ended—to what I am reduced at last!”

His nervous hands wandered one over the other. His regret was more for the money he had lost, than the awful crime he had perpetrated. I could see it, even in the early time of that avowal. Something in my looks warned him of the opinion I had formed, for he added eagerly:

“Don't think that I ever forgot you—that some day I didn't mean to give back all the money. In

my will I left every farthing of my property to you—whatever money I may die possessed of will become the family's—it shall never leave the Gears."

"Vaughan threatens you, at times, with disclosing all to me, and to other creditors, likely to be less lenient?"

"That's it!—that's it!" said he, "but the other creditors are scattered and dead, buried, or gone abroad. It was only you whom I feared. There was something behind your good temper, your patience, very hard and inflexible, and I dreaded it."

"Dread it no longer," I said, "but try to ask God to forgive you, as I do, all the past bitter wrong engendered by a foul cupidity. Why, I don't believe you are really sorry for all this wrong done yet."

"I am—indeed I am!" he whined.

"Well, I will keep your secret—more, I will ask you to keep it from one faithful heart, which gives the eldest born the first place there. We will not shadow her whole after-life by dealing such a blow to all her pride in you."

"Certainly not," said my brother, with alacrity.

"She has praised your shrewdness all your life," I said.

He winced at this—but it was a homethrust that might do him good, and I did not spare him much.

"And now, to change a subject that is very painful, tell me why Vaughan and you quarrelled to-day?"

He hesitated for an instant.

"Go on—we need have no secrets about this, I think."

"He thinks I am—I am just a little too attentive to Mrs. Ray," Joseph confessed.

"Do those attentions affect him?"

"I don't see how—but they do," said my brother; "I should have thought that if I were lucky enough to secure Mrs. Ray, it would have been better for his own chances of extorting money from me."

"No matter—he objects?"

"Yes."

"And these attentions you confess to?"

The hand that was passing over his furrowed forehead paused. He glanced askance at me.

"To a certain extent they are attentions—but

they are not taken offence at by Mrs. Ray, and who else has a right to complain?"

"Many, I think. And now, Joseph, the last question of all—Do you intend to ask Mrs. Ray to marry you?"

"Why should I not?" he rejoined.

"It is an unnatural union—it is a mockery of marriage, against which every honest soul protests."

"Canute," he said, in a low excited whisper, "it is saving me—the whole family—from ruin. It is a princely fortune, and in careful hands might be doubled. It is only hampered by a feeble woman, who, please God, can't live very long. See the chances of a man rising in life, and ask him if he can give them all up for the sake of what a few sentimental beings may say of him."

"I warn you that you are on dangerous ground—that only harm can follow this intention. I believe that there is no real penitence in you for all the past guilt, if you continue to prosecute this scheme."

"It is worth the risk of danger, or of being misunderstood," he said. "If I marry Mrs. Ray, Canute, you shall see how wrongly you have

judged me. You, at least, will not interfere with my hopes?"

"I have no right."

"You are the only one to whom I have confessed my intention," he said; "to Vaughan I have denied it."

"Will the falsehood avail you much? Is not the truth suspected by Mrs. Ray—more than suspected by her daughter?"

"She is a child," said my brother contemptuously; "a wilful passionate child, whose folly her mother laughs at."

"Well, well," I said, tired of the subject, "before you is a labyrinth, and you are your own master. I have expressed my opinion on your plans, and now have done with them."

"You are too ideal," said Joseph; "you do not look at life with my eyes."

"Thank God, no!"

"You will not betray me?" he said, alarmed at my outburst; "you will remember that you have forgiven all the past?"

"I will remember."

"If I ever become rich again, I will pay you to the uttermost farthing, Canute," he whined.

I did not reply to this—I was glad to unlock

the door and escape from the room. Joseph Gear had lost *caste* with me—all the sordidness of his nature had been laid bare that night, and its awful depths revolted me. His estimate of right and wrong, his disregard of every social law when it stood between him and his lust for money, bewildered me and stunned me.

I left him sitting there, pondering over all that he had confessed, and perhaps regretting the revelation, and went into the best room to think of it after my own fashion.

Thinking thus, when an arm stole round my neck and a fair face was pressed against my own.

"You are very serious to-night," said Mary; "this is not my Canute, whose good temper, patience, love, make home so bright a place."

"I have lost faith in one I loved," I said, bitterly; "in the brother I have been taught to look up to and reverence."

"And it disheartens you?"

"Yes—naturally."

"You, a strong man, will understand what a poor weak woman has suffered, then," said she; "when all that she was taught to reverence betrayed itself and was set to work against her.

But you, dear Canute, will not give way?—that is not in *your* nature.”

“No, no—there is nothing to give way at, Mary. I am only startled at the little knowledge we may possess of those we love—at the awful secrets which may have affected all their lives and yet are hidden from us.”

“Sometimes in charity—in mercy hidden by those who struggle on and make no sign—say sometimes that, Canute?”

“Sometimes, perhaps.”

“There are secrets of others which we dare not acknowledge—your brother’s was his own.”

“Yes.”

“You have forgiven him?”

“Yes—why should I bear him malice?”

“Yours is ever a noble nature, husband—God be thanked that every day I understand it better, and value it and the blessing it brings the more.”

“Ever a flatterer, Mary. Put on your bonnet and let us stroll by the Ferry banks till the stars come out. This has disturbed you, and we must not have you looking pale again.”

CHAPTER V.

MRS. RAY'S HOUSE-WARMING.

DURING the progress of the alterations, I found time to visit Borrowdale nearly once a week. Mr. Sanderson was busy, and occasionally required my services at home. Mrs. Ray objected to these flittings, it may be said here—she flattered me by her opinion that the work never progressed satisfactorily unless I was by to superintend it. Her anxiety to get the drawing-room finished was intense; her usual complaint, that old as she was, she could not afford to lose time, occurred very frequently at this juncture. In July the room was finished and decorated, and the library and eastern room making

rapid progress. In July, Mrs. Ray issued her invitations.

“You and your wife have promised to come,” she said to me; “I want all my friends to see what a fine house I’ve got—what a crowd of decent people I can bring to it. I ’spose it’ll cost a heap of money?”

“There is not much doubt of that, Mrs. Ray,” I said, hoping her natural prudence might lead her to reflect upon the matter at the eleventh hour.

“I don’t mind money for this once—Letty’s coming out, and I hope will marry a gentleman. Why shouldn’t she?”

I did not see any reason why she should not.

“She’s on’y got a fiery temper—some gen’lemen like spitfires, or they wouldn’t marry ’em so often. I should like to see Letty married comfortably,” said the mother, with a touch of maternal solicitude in the hard dry voice.

“She would be all the happier.”

“Everybody’s the happier for being married, old or young,” said Mrs. Ray, looking at me askance out of the corners of her eyes; “don’t you think so?”

"No—I don't."

"Your brother does."

"His opinions are not mine, Mrs. Ray. On many important topics we differ very considerably."

"He's a sharp man—I should say much sharper than you are, Mr. Gear."

"I believe he bears that reputation."

"I like a man that looks out sharp—it shows 'cuteness. I like a man who can take care of himself, don't you?"

I answered somewhat irrelevantly, and she added rather sharply,

"And I hate a man that doesn't pay attention when people are talking to 'em. There's not a greater nuisance than talking to a dummy, mind you. Now, lookee here, I want to talk about the expenses of this party. What'll it cost to do the thing in style, Mr. Gear?"

"Sixty or seventy pounds—perhaps more."

"Good lor, so much as that!" gasped the old lady. "Oh! then I'll ony have one of 'em, just to show the world what I can do if I like. Just to show the world what a mistake it made, when it called me a covetous old woman. Why should I save up money for other people, when I can enjoy

life now, Mr. Gear? Who'll thank me when I'm dead?" she cried, fiercely; "not she, at least!"

Letty had entered the room whilst she was speaking, and was the object at which she pointed.

"Thank you for what?"

"For the money I shall leave behind for you to spend."

Letty was in her most sullen mood.

"You'll have no thanks from me."

"Don't be sure you'll get it yet, you hussy," said Mrs. Ray, shaking her index finger at her; "I've a card to play yet, if I like, and I may like, if you vex me. Or I may spend all the money in sixty-pound parties—twice a week. How many years would that last—how many years should I, I wonder?"

I left Mrs. Ray lost in those grave calculations, but found her and her carriage at the Ferry Inn when I went home to dinner. She had surprised my wife by a morning call, and had teased and worried her into accepting her invitation.

Most of Mrs. Ray's invitations were accepted, she told me, with a satisfactory chuckle, two days afterwards.

"They are coming out of curoosity—they are coming out of condescension—the clergyman's coming because he isn't a proud man ; and the Justice, because he is, and likes to show hissself off in company. It went against the grain to ask Mad Wenford, who allus talks to me as though I kep a public-house still ; but I've asked him, too. They say the lead mine's tamed him very much—so bless the lead mine!"

"Has Mr. Vaughan accepted, may I ask?"

"Oh! yes—long ago. Mr. Vaughan and I are getting on very well now—we forgets and forgives, like Christian folk. Do you remember you and I, arm in arm, watching him come across the Ferry once?"

"Well?"

"And what I said?"

"Well?" I repeated.

"I said he was coming at us like a Fate—he's been an uncommon nice Fate to me. He made his sister's life a misery, and she flew into your arms, and lost the money. He!—he!—and lost the money!"

The old lady nearly choked herself laughing at the force of circumstances that had raised her to greatness—my brother making his appearance at

this moment to inquire after her health afforded me a pretext to escape, and a chance to him of participating in the jest.

The house-warming night took place on the 20th of July. I dwell upon it here for the signs of an old story that came to light there, and startled me—for the signs of a new story that evolved thence. The guests were many, and their reception not a bad one. Mrs. Ray had hired from London a master of the ceremonies, as she had hired the Quadrille band. Her daughter and governess did the honours of the reception—the old lady, clad in amber brocade, sat in a corner of the room and enjoyed herself. She even had the good sense to say very little, and to bow and smile rather than talk to those who offered her their congratulations at coming into the family property. When my wife and I entered the room, at a late hour—at a very late hour, for we were anxious to abridge our visit in one way or another—she beckoned us towards her.

“How do you think it all looks?” she whispered.

We thought that it all looked very well, and very grand.

“They’re playing at cards in another room, if you like cards. They’re dancing here, if you like

dancing. I'm sitting still and looking on—it was the gal's advice."

"Letty's?"

"Ah!—have you seen her? She's a wonder, if ever there was one. She's like a princess, and carries it off grand. Proud am I of her, for the first time in my life—a real lady! a real lady!"

"Where is she?" I asked.

"Somewhere about," said the mother; "go and look after her, and tell her what a lady she is—it pleases her. And you, Mary Gear—I almost said Zitman, it's so nat'ral—sit down here by an old woman's side, and talk to me as though you bore no malice. After all, it's lonely here for me—the guv-ness taught *me* nothing, and if I open my mouth, they look as if they wanted hard to laugh. Do you mind sitting down?" she reiterated to my wife.

"Mind!—no."

"They'll wonder—some of 'em—why loss of money has brought back the good looks, those who knowed her when she was a lawyer's daughter. And they'll see she bears no malice—that's what *I* want!"

She laid her wrinkled hand upon my wife's.

"No malice, is it?"

"Not the least in the world."

"Not for 'all the harm I wished you once, and all the harm I tried to do—say No to that?"

"No."

"Sit here a while and show 'em that, while your husband looks about him. Bring my daughter here, Mr. Gear, for your wife to see. She has a pink silk on, that cost a guinea a yard!"

Through the crowd of visitors—many of whom had come twenty miles to hold revelry together—I pushed my way in search, not of Letty Ray, but of Ellen Vaughan. They were dancing, some of the guests; those who hung about the doors were whispering of the great fortune that had befallen the Rays with an openness and want of breeding common to guests in general. My wife was well known to the majority of the visitors. I was a stranger to those who lived not in the neighbourhood. Mrs. Ray had well counted on the effect likely to be produced by her propinquity to my wife—they were talking of it round about me.

"She bears her losses well—what an earnest face it is!—how pretty she is looking!"

"What a contrast!" said another.

"Or rather odious comparison," remarked a third.

I passed on into the card-room ; through the card-room to other rooms thrown open, and brilliantly lighted. The windows of some of the rooms were open, and I glanced hastily through them as I passed. Here and there were stray couples from the dancing ; beyond these on the terrace, running along the garden side of the house, were other figures wandering. I passed out and looked down the terrace in search of Ellen ; the cool night air was welcome after the heated rooms. The promenaders passed me, chiefly in pairs ; one of the last to pass was Herbert Vaughan, with Letty Ray upon his arm. I knew her by the colour and costliness of the silk she wore, before she passed the window, and her striking face was lit up from the glare within. A very handsome but a very agitated countenance it seemed to me ; and the voice was far from calm, that reached my ears for a moment as they passed me.

"This is a strange confidence, Mr. Vaughan. Let me have no more of it."

"Whom have I to confide in, Letty ?" Vaughan answered.

"Any one but me," she said ; "anyone better than me!"

They were past me, and I went back into the

room to wonder at this friendliness—to see danger in it to this low-born heiress. Returning towards the drawing-room, a hand was pressed upon my arm.

“Are you in search of me, Canute? I have Mrs. Ray’s word for it.”

“Yes, I am in search of you, Nellie.”

“This is a change from Nettlewood, something to think of for a day or two afterwards, and so a welcome change. Have you seen my husband?”

“A moment or two since.”

“With Miss Ray?” she inquired.

“Yes. I believe with Miss Ray.”

She laughed, but I missed the musical ring in her merriment. It was a forced laugh, however well disguised.

“They are great friends. I believe if I were to die—which I am not going to do, if I can help it—Herbert would marry Letty Ray. What a temptation to put a little arsenic in my tea, Canute!”

“This is grim jesting, Ellen,” I said, gravely; “I don’t like it.”

“One must jest at something, Canute—one must seek excitement, or die of monotony in Nettlewood. And I tell you, I won’t die!”

"Again."

"Where's Mr. Wenford?—have you seen him?"

"Not this evening."

"He was here early; he is my *preux chevalier*, to hold my fan and bouquet, to flirt with, for the sake of a change or of excitement, Canute—eh?"

I looked at her. She *was* excited that evening; her cheeks were flushed; her dark eyes flashed upon me; when she turned her face towards me, there was a furrow across her white forehead that I had not seen before. Her whole manner was new, but of a newness that made my heart sink.

"I must tease Letty to-night, also—that will be an old sensation, that pleases me little. I like to rouse that handsome lioness, and see the fire in her annihilating glances. Ah! here is Mr. Wenford!"

He came up as she spoke. I thought of Mrs. Ray's remark, that the lead mine had tamed him a great deal—he looked so grave before he recognized us. Then his old manner flamed up at once.

"Good evening, Mr. Gear. You come to this old woman's kick-up with the rest of us. What a hideous old witch she looks in amber, to be sure!"

"Hush! they will hear you," said Ellen.

"Oh! they have all been saying the same thing," he said, carelessly; "and I've never been

a man to study my words. Is not that true, Gear?"

"True enough, Mr. Wenford."

"Not but what I have been striving to be a little more polished," he said, laughing; "it's Mrs. Vaughan's wish. She, poor mistaken woman, sees the elements of good inherent in me, and, in striving to develop them, I thank her for her interest, and for the improvement of which she has been the cause. I was never fit for woman's society until I knew your sister."

"Shall I make you my best curtsey for that compliment?" said Ellen.

"No; make your promise good by dancing the next quadrille with me."

"Willingly."

He offered her his arm, and she left mine to take it.

"I shall see you again," she said to me, and went away. I followed in their wake, and watched them join the quadrille, and took note of the animated dialogue between the parts. I was perplexed as well as pained to see how friendly Ellen had become with that man—desperate, dangerous, and devoid of principle. If this were her excitement, it were better perhaps to fall into the past

life of Mary Zitman, and become the nervous, frightened woman I had known her once. And after all, was it an excitement which rendered her one step nearer forgetfulness? I thought not, when suddenly she turned her face away from Wenford, and upon it there settled a stony apathy, that was so akin to despair, that I could have shrieked out "Nellie!" as I watched her.

When the dance was over, Mr. Wenford led Ellen away into the refreshment-room; the stony look had vanished then, and she was bright with smiles. I was proceeding in search of Mary, when Herbert Vaughan met me and shook hands.

"Good evening, Mr. Gear. You are a late visitor."

"I fear I am somewhat late."

"Parties in Cumberland break up at earlier hours than in London—the pleasure-seekers having many miles to go. Have you seen my wife?"

"Yes—a few moments back."

"With Mr. Wenford, I suppose?" he added, carelessly.

"Yes—with Mr. Wenford."

"He is an amusing man. Ellen takes a great

interest in his eccentricities—I let her have her own way now, Mr. Gear.”

“Indeed!”

“She and I have taken some time in judging each other’s character—opposite natures, clashing a little at first. But we have got over all that, and are, you will be glad to hear, always the best of friends.”

“I am very glad to hear that.”

“Certainly we drift our own ways, and adopt the grand policy of non-intervention with each other’s pursuits. It is at least more conducive to the serenity of the connubial atmosphere.”

“I trust those pursuits do not separate you much?”

“Nothing to speak of—nothing at which either complains,” he said. “Where is Mary?”

“With Mrs. Ray, I believe.”

“I shall see her presently. What a maze of cross-purposes these evening parties are!”

“Probably.”

He seemed inclined to moralize, and loth to part with me for once.

“What a myriad of evil purposes hatching beneath these smiling masks—what plots against one’s happiness are being fostered by hearts we should

believe in, and friends in whom we have trusted all our lives. Each man's thoughts brooding over his neighbour's shame, and seeking his discomfiture."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing particular—I am speaking generally. Have you studied ancient literature?"

"Not very deeply."

"The novelists of the good old times—men and women who spoke out plainly, and in whose works there were more depth of interest and truer photographs of life. The Behns, Heywoods, Manleys, the Hills, Smolletts, Fieldings, drew life more accurately than the Dickens, Gaskells, Brontes of our own time."

"They might have been true to life in their day, as the great masters are in ours."

"The great masters are not true—they fear to write the truth, lest the nineteenth century morals should be shocked. Life is now as it was in Charles and Queen Anne's time, but society must not be outraged by a fair transcript of it. By all that's solemn, Gear, I believe that life is worse!"

He looked very intently at me—the subject had excited him, and his face betrayed it. His prim-

rose gloved hand pressed my arm hard as he hissed forth, rather than spoke, the last few words.

"I need not say, Vaughan, I don't agree with you. Life is more pure and delicate, and hence its writers grope less for foul specimens."

"You don't know life," cried Vaughan; "life's a dream with *you*. When the waking comes, the shock will strike you down."

He turned away, and pondering on the pains he had taken to start so abstract a subject, and the sudden dash of friendliness exhibited, I joined my wife, whom Mrs. Ray was talking quietly to death.

Mary was as glad to escape, as Mrs. Ray was loth to part with her. Mary was evidently intended for the show-guest of the evening; the hostess had striven hard to get her there, to prove to the world what friends they were together. That world was already slowly revolving itself into its component atoms; those who had far to go had already departed; supper at twelve P.M. had even no charms powerful enough to bid them stop.

As Mary and I left Mrs. Ray, a slim figure in evening dress stole from behind the window curtains where he had been hiding, and sidled towards the lady of the house. He had been waiting and

watching with great interest, and now his patience was rewarded by a vacant seat near the hostess.

I thought of Vaughan's mocking words only a few moments since. "What a myriad of evil purposes hatching beneath these smiling masks!" For was it not an evil purpose to study the weakness, flatter the vanity of this poor decrepid woman in the lust for the gold of which she made parade.

"I think we have had enough of this festivity," I said, to my wife.

"Are you tired?"

"I am tired of this scene at least."

"Oh! I am so sorry, dear! I promised Mrs. Ray to stay till the party broke up; shall I go and ask her to withdraw my promise."

"No. They will break up soon, I am told. The guests are thinning already."

We sat down together to watch the varied crowd flitting so gaily by us. Letty Ray passed us more than once, but her attention was generally too much absorbed for us to intrude upon it. There were many dangles in her train; she was at least the reigning belle of that night.

"She is very handsome," whispered Mary; "after all, she will make a good match."

"In every sense of the word, I hope so."

"She is as haughty as a queen, Canute," whispered my wife; "what a proud look she wears now!"

It seemed more disdainful than proud to me—on her face that told so much, and was so true an index to her feelings, I fancied that I could read her undisguised contempt for the court which her attendants paid her. In her rich silk dress, in her lace and jewels—jewels that had been my wife's once—she thought herself the inn-keeper's daughter still; she was thinking of that past estate, and wondering where all this homage would have been if the change had never come to her. Her hearty contempt for what was low and servile pleased me; led me to regret that her character was not more likely to be influenced by those whose good example might soften it, and render it more truly womanly. For it was an unformed character yet, and I feared for the influences that might affect it in the future. A hot-tempered and impulsive woman, swayed by a word, and yet softened by a word; easily roused to anger, and yet by her wild affection easily led away!

I was looking at her still, when Herbert Vaughan joined her. I saw her face flush at his approach, and her eyes light up at the chance of his rescuing

her from the crowd of dangles that beset her. She was leaning on his arm a moment afterwards, and he was stooping forward, and whispering to her very earnestly.

"They are great friends," said Mary; "what does it mean?"

"It means that they are great friends—nothing more, I suppose," I answered, absently.

I was thinking of the dark night when Letty Ray plunged wildly at death as to the one solace only left her—of her cry then that she had been deceived in all which she had hoped in. Words more strange still came back to me, as though they had been spoken yesterday—"Mark me, I will never cease to love that man!"

Was that the man?—and if she loved him still, what was to be the end of the story? It struck me that I gained a clearer insight into Vaughan's character that night, than I had done in all my past acquaintance with him. I felt that he was a villain, who studied nothing but his own selfish ends—that for himself and his position he was ever scheming, and that those in the way of his success were obstacles to be trampled under foot.

After all, he was no perfect villain. He betrayed too much at times; he was too earnest, too

eager in the chase. With time before me, I felt that my matter-of-fact honesty of purpose would baffle him, and drag his schemes to daylight. He was to some extent a mystery to me, because time had not been spared me to attempt his divination. And with that time at my disposal, was the inclination strong enough to seek to follow the tortuous windings of his crafty nature? I thought not then; I did not know how close the hour was, when tracking him would be the one main object of my life. It only struck me then that he was a knave—as I had always suspected—and that beneath the fair exterior lay a host of thoughts dangerous to all who mistrusted him, or guessed those thoughts too truly.

I looked round for Ellen, a woman of keen perception, and not likely to be a patient witness or a willing slave. With all his self-confidence, I felt that one great mistake in life was made when he took her for his wife. She was strong to resist—they must be strong measures to keep her down.

To my surprise Ellen was standing alone in the recess of the fourth window; she beckoned to me at once. Mary at the same instant was addressed by an old lady seated near her, an old lady who could

scarcely believe that she was the Mrs. Zitman of Nettlewood, who leaned forward to ask the question, and claim a past acquaintance if the answer were in the affirmative.

"I shall be back in a minute," I whispered, and then crossed the room to Ellen's side.

"I am going home—good night," she said.

"Home—alone?"

"Yes—I am tired of this acting—I am sick at heart to-night. Will you see me to the fly?"

"Certainly, but——"

"But don't ask questions—I cannot answer them; they will not be worth answering," she said, hurriedly; "my excitement is over, and I shall be glad to get in my room before the reaction comes."

"Shall I find your husband?—he will doubtless be willing to accompany you."

"Leave him to his own amusements," she said, drily; "I have pledged my word not to interfere with him. He will not thank me, if I claim his escort home."

"I will accompany you."

"It will lead to a few words, and I have escaped them lately. He will be home in good time, and I shall not sit up for him."

"Ellen, dear Ellen—you *are* unhappy. Will you trust in me?—will you ask me to help you?"

"You would help me with your whole heart if you had the power, my poor Canute," she said; "but you are powerless, and there are no weapons to parry the side-thrusts in the dark. Besides, I am not unhappy—ask me to swear to that?"

"No—no."

"You are nervous about me, but it is only the brother's love which starts into the light at a word. You think I am jealous?"

"No," I said, more dubiously.

"Jealous of Letty Ray—as if *that woman* had power to give me one heart-pang."

She crushed the bouquet in her hand as she spoke, and the flowers dropped silently to her feet, like the dead hopes over which she secretly mourned.

"Take me home," she said, again, impatiently.

She drew the opera-cloak closer round her shoulders, and we went out of the room together.

"Shall I speak to Herbert?" I said, when we had passed through the heavy curtains draping the doorway; "shall I tell him——"

"Nothing," she interrupted me with; "I tell you again that I am not jealous. I have not one

word to say against my husband, or the step that made him so, or the spell which drew him to me, and entranced me with him. My God! how I loved that man, and would have died for him!"

"Courage!—courage!"

"Courage!" she exclaimed, indignantly, "do you fear *that* too? My dear Canute, that grows stronger; that has power to keep its ground and defy the enemies who are mustering to do battle with me. If there be danger in advance of me—I see it, and have strength to meet it."

A little while ago, Ellen had spoken of her excitement being past for that night—I had never known her more excited than at that time. Her hand shook upon the arm which supported it; her face was strangely agitated. I should have liked to have assured her in that moment, but she checked me at once by saying, "Don't speak again!" And in what manner could I have assured her, guessing so vaguely at the dangers in her way?

A fly was waiting for her outside. On the threshold of the door she extended her hands towards me, before pushing back the hood from her face to gaze at me. That speaking face, that face which had turned so pale, and yet was so firm

and defiant of her own hard fate, thrilled me—the look thereon I never forgot! In my dreams for many many nights it haunted me; between the parted curtains of my bed it looked down on me; in the business life it crossed me, and took away my breath—at times it haunts me still!

She looked so long and silently at me, that I said,

“Have you anything more to say, Ellen?”

“Yes.”

Her hands tightened their clasp, and the lips parted.

“Whatever you may hear of me, believe not. In the future, when they speak against me, and I am dead or not by to answer them, reserve your judgment, and trust in God’s good time to give the lie to them. The mists are closing round me, and I cannot see my way. Believe in me ever, Canute!”

She dropped my hands and darted into the carriage, reaching out her own white arm to close the door. I followed her, beset by a wild thought.

“You will say more than this, Nellie?”

“No. Kiss me and say good-bye.”

“Good-bye, then.”

She was in pain, and my presence there pro-

longed it. I turned away, and the driver applied his whip to the horse.

So the mists closed round her !

CHAPTER VI.

JOSEPH AND LETTY.

THE guests were hastening away. I met them coming from the ball-room towards me—the grating of many carriage-wheels I left behind, as I re-entered the house. The supper had been extended to too late an hour, and though many of the guests were fond of supper, yet time was valuable and long journies were before them. Mrs. Ray's immediate neighbours were scattered sparsely at the supper-table—it looked rather a dreary company assembled there.

“We’re waiting for you, Mr. Gear,” said Mrs. Ray, from the head of the table; “where’s your sister?”

“Gone home, ma’am.”

"Gone home!" echoed Herbert Vaughan, from his seat immediately facing me, "ah!—well!"

He shrugged his shoulders in a demonstrative manner, and then addressed a few words to the lady at his side. He took Mrs. Vaughan's absence philosophically at least, and betrayed not any vexation at her abrupt retirement. He was the well-bred guest, courteous and smiling, whom nothing could ruffle; I felt that I could have leaned across the table and struck at him as he sat there stripping his primrose kids—stitched in an eccentric manner with black—from his white hands. My dislike to him was gathering strength—my sister's unhappiness—for it was unhappiness—had steeled my heart against him, and I hated him from that night.

"We're very short of people here," commented Mrs. Ray, who had gathered sufficient nerve to be more conversational; "I should have liked 'em to have stopped a bit and seen this. Hollo, are you going too?"

"Yes, madam."

The tall form of Mr. Wenford was blocking up the doorway. He looked very white and confused, I thought, and stared hard at Vaughan whilst replying to the hostess.

"You're in a hurry, Mr. Wenford?"

"Yes. I have business at home to transact—there's nothing to stop for here," he added, with his old abruptness.

"Then you'd better go," said Mrs. Ray, dry and indignant. "Now you lads," to the lacquies at the back, "be brisk, and do what's proper!"

Letty tried to attract her mother's attention from the opposite end of the table, but the old lady was not to be attracted. The servants had brought her many glasses of port—she was always fond of port!—that evening, and her confidence had returned, and a fair portion of her old loquacity. She was mistress of the house, and had a right to speak.

Mr. Wenford took his departure as the clock on the mantel-piece chimed twelve, and Mrs. Ray directed her attention to Mr. Joseph Gear, sitting at her side, and very solicitous as to her tastes at supper. There was soon a hum of voices from the remaining guests, and Mrs. Ray's peculiarities of English were lost in the murmurs that ensued. I ate little myself; I was heartsick with anxiety concerning Ellen—her farewell words were ringing in my ears and troubling me.

I kept my eyes on Herbert Vaughan; for the

first time in my life I sat down there to study him. His eyes were more restless than mine that night—I noticed that his hand trembled once, as he raised a wine-glass to his lips. He looked in my direction just then, and swerved from my intent gaze with a half frown that resented the scrutiny. He was talking to my wife the next moment—my wife, whom, with a strange politeness, he had escorted into the supper-room. But he could not rest—something beset him at the feast, I was assured. The reason for Ellen's absence, or the speculation in the lead mine which had proved so profitless, or one of a hundred thoughts, impossible for me to guess, came between him and the present scene, and took him far away from the company around him. He had less appetite than I had; I saw him push his plate aside a little impatiently, and sign to the footman to remove it. Whilst the footman's arm was passed between him and my wife, he glanced at my brother Joseph—leaned forward and looked down the length of the half-deserted table towards Letty Ray—once again glanced across at me, as though my attentive watch disturbed him.

“You are looking pale, Mr. Gear,” he said to me across the table, “are you not well?”

"Yes—quite well," I answered.

Mary's face, full of interest, looked in the same direction on the instant—I could see the same question in her full grey eyes. I smiled at her, and her face lighted up at once—what had I done in my time to deserve so pure and deep a love!

The supper was over, and the guests were seized with a mad hurry to be gone. They were tired of dancing, of their illiterate hostess, of the late hour to which the festivity had been prolonged; they were early-retiring, early-rising people, and the dissipation into which they had plunged began to scare them. There was a rush from the house, a general flitting away. When we returned to the drawing-room, Mrs. Ray was sitting before the empty fire-grate in the old home-posture, and Letty crouching at her side as of yore. Never did the splendid trappings of these women look more out of place—remind me more of the Ferry Inn, and the peat fire burning in that narrow stifling room they had exchanged for this.

My wife was waiting for me there; Joseph Gear was lingering still, and disinclined to move. Herbert Vaughan, with his primrose kids on again, was swinging his hat in his hand.

"Shall you and I go back together, Mr. Gear?" asked Vaughan of Joseph.

"No, sir," with considerable firmness, "I am waiting for my brother."

"As you will. Good night all."

And Herbert Vaughan was one more guest removed.

He had scarcely passed through the curtained door when Letty sprang up, as if it had been the signal for her attack on Joseph Gear.

"You had better go, sir!" she exclaimed, with a quivering voice; "I warn you that you had better go at once."

Mrs. Ray was even startled out of her stoicism by the fierce voice—by this extraordinary sequence to "a pleasant evening."

"Heyday! what does this mean?"

"What does *he* mean," cried Letty, fiercely, "by coming here day after day, by speaking of me and warning you of me, as he has done to-night?"

"I—I—I," began Joseph, turning of a lively grey, and dropping into a chair at this dead thrust at him, "I—I beg to be allowed to explain myself."

"There needs no explanation, sir," cried Letty;

"it explains itself, you poor schemer, grasping at the money which shall never be yours—scheme as you may. I tell you from this night that I will not have you here—that I am mistress here!"

She drew herself up proudly, as she proclaimed the fact. Joseph shrank more and more, and bit his finger-nails perplexedly.

"Mistress!" exclaimed Mrs. Ray, making a stand upon her dignity.

"Mistress or nothing," cried Letty; "you are in your dotage, and are the tool of such bad men as he. I must protect you, or leave you to yourself—which is to be?"

"In my dotage!—of all the impercence I've ever heard, that caps it!"

Joseph saw his advantage—Mrs. Ray was shaking with passion at her daughter's charge—he darted in here, defiant of his audience.

He rose and skipped towards the old lady.

"Mrs. Ray, your daughter has insulted me before my brother and his wife—chosen her time purposely to insult me, as I choose it now to defend myself. She may be naturally mortified at any wish of mine—at any wish of mine to make you more happy than *she* has done, and to devote my life-long service to you."

Joseph's words pleased her no more than her daughter's. Her response to them seemed an echo of her reply to Letty.

"Life-long service! Of all the fools I've ever met, you cap 'em!"

"God bless me!" ejaculated Joseph.

"I've got my wits about me—there's no dotage yet," she cried; "I can see my daughter thinks more of herself than me, and that you are the silliest of men. I thought you'd come to this, and was likely to fall into the trap instead of me. You've been uncommon kind, Joseph Gear, but I don't want to see you again. It makes words—it makes words!"

"I—I wonder where my hat is?" Joseph murmured as he feebly made towards the door, beaten down and utterly humiliated. When he was half-way towards the corridor, he gave a little run and disappeared, glad to let the curtain drop upon him.

"Mother," said Letty, letting her jewelled hand fall on the old woman's shoulder, "I ask your pardon. I have misjudged you—I thought you that man's dupe."

"I was a-trying you all the time—how you would bear it—what he'd do and say at last. But, oh! lor—it's been a'most too much for me!"

"Leave her now—leave her," said Letty, almost impatiently; "I wish to speak with her—to show her that I am her daughter still."

"Daughter or mistress?"

"Daughter!"

She dropped down at her feet again, and took the old woman's hand in hers—from that picture, new and touching to both of us, we turned away.

Joseph was not waiting for us—at the Ferry Inn he was not visible when we arrived. In our room Mary and I talked long and earnestly of all the events of that night, perplexing and inscrutable. I fell asleep before the subject was fully discussed—I was awakened by her hand upon my shoulder, shaking me.

"Canute—Canute, do wake!"

"What's the matter?—what is it?"

Mary was sitting up in bed, with a shawl fastened round her.

"Hush!—do you hear anything?"

"Nothing."

I strained my ears to listen, but all was silent as the grave.

"Not the plash of oars? Some one is crossing the Ferry!"

"Nonsense, Mary—you have been dreaming."

"I have been sitting up here listening some time," she said, shuddering. "Oh! Canute, I feel as if there were mischief abroad to-night!"

"In the bright morning we shall laugh at this."

She lay down, and fell asleep again—moaning at times in her sleep, as though in pain. Once she whispered in her sleep, "Some one is crossing the Ferry!" with a sharpness and distinctness that chilled me as I listened. She must have slept, and I must have lain awake an hour, when a pistol-shot, afar off amongst the mountains, roused me to something like action. I stole from my bed, without waking my wife, and drew the blind aside from the casement to peer forth. It was not morning yet, but the late moon was struggling to shine through the mass of fleecy cloud below it. It was neither light nor dark. I could see the quiet water, and the Ferry house below me—afar off stretched the barren hills, walls of rock, that shut all in, and hid all secrets from me. It was a cold, repellent landscape.

All was still and unfathomable—there was nothing beyond to guess at.

“In the bright morning we shall laugh at this,” I had said to Mary, before she slept again, confident in my assertion, and believing that I must be right. But there was no bright morning waiting for us—only greater doubts and deeper fears.

CHAPTER VII.

THE WORST OF NEWS.

I ROSE early. The night's, or rather the early morning's, interruption had rendered me restless, and I could not lie idle after sunrise. I rose depressed ; an indefinable sense of something wrong weighed me down. True to last night's promise, I tried to laugh at this—to attribute it to Mrs. Ray's party, the late hours, and the fitful rest that had succeeded it. Leaving Mary asleep, I went cautiously downstairs, lest I should wake Jabez, who was in no hurry to rise, business being slack. The tap-room door was open as I passed, and looking in I perceived my brother Joseph leaning with his arms across the settle, and

his head buried in his arms. He was a light sleeper, for he looked up, and called out "Who's there?"

"It is I. I am going for a stroll. My head aches."

"I'll—I'll go with you."

He rose very wearily, and came out of the Inn with me, very red and sleepy-eyed. The door was on the latch—a custom of Jabez's, of which I could not break him.

"Who was coming in?—who was going to rob a place like his'n?"

Joseph was in his last night's dress—as near an approach to evening dress as he had managed to extemporize for the occasion, and he emerged into the daylight the feeblest and flabbiest of individuals.

"Have you not been to bed?" I asked.

"No—I couldn't sleep," he said, yawning; "I have been wandering about half the night trying to cool the fever here."

He laid his hand on the top of his head in a ludicrous manner.

"Did you hear a pistol fired in the night?" I asked, my thoughts recurring to one element of disturbance which had kept me restless.

"Yes—at five-and-twenty minutes past two. I timed it by my watch."

"Why?" I asked.

"It seemed strange, and I like to be precise in these matters."

"Did anything else happen that was strange that night?"

"Well—I don't see the ferry boat, that's all."

I went out of the house followed by my brother. I proceeded at once to the Ferry, and discovered that the boat was missing, and that the rope which had fastened it to the platform had been cut through.

"This is singular," I said, standing at the waters' edge, and staring at this evidence of mystery before me.


"Everything seems singular about here," commented Joseph.

"What do you mean?" I said, turning quickly upon him.

"Everything puzzles me, and I don't understand anything—that's all."

"Have you seen anything more?" I asked.

Joseph, with his hands thrust to the bottoms of his trouser pockets, stood gravely surveying



the water. I repeated my question before he answered me.

"Nothing more," he said; "but this is singular enough. P'raps—p'raps it's a joke of somebody's. The young fellows at the party drank Mrs. Ray's wine pretty freely, didn't they?"

"I did not notice."

"I did," he said; "it was an awful waste. Mrs. Ray drank a good deal of wine, too. She was always nudging the waiter and croaking 'Port, John.' A selfish old beast as ever lived!" he added.

"Why, Joseph—opinions have changed, old fellow?"

"Well they may," he said, "when people change and turn against one. I'm going back to London to-day."

"So soon?"

"I can't stop here," he added; "it's a waste of time now, and I've a living to get. Which do you call the nearest way to Keswick and Borrowdale?"

"The nearest way on foot!"

"I can't afford to ride," he answered, testily.

"The very nearest is over the Black and White Gaps—but it's difficult work. The second way is

by the car road, that runs at the foot of the mountains opposite."

"Humph!" said my brother, "I'll consider which of the two, I shall take. What do you think of the weather?"

"That it will continue fine."

"Then I'll attempt the Gaps in an hour or two. My head aches very much. I think I'll try and get another nap before the landlord comes clumping down in his heavy boots. I shall see you again."

He dawdled back towards the Inn, and left me still at the water's edge. Across the water I could see the ferry boat carefully tied to the small landing-stage there. Whoever had gone across Nettlewood water had not returned, at least, and had been courteous enough to secure the boat for its proprietor. After all, perhaps the proprietor had gone across himself, and I was perplexing myself with ridiculous suppositions. I turned away, and set forth on a brisk walk down the Henlock road. The air was fresh, the sun was bright, the birds were darting to and fro—a walk would do me good, and scare away the morbid fancies which beset me.

I went on briskly, as though I would outwalk

them. The early morning air did some good, and relieved my mind from a degree of weight. I passed The Larches—Mr. Wenford's house—and noticed that three servants were standing in an abstracted manner together on the lawn, with their hands behind them, engaged in some desultory conversation. I went on to Nettlewood Crag, the site of the lead mine which had proved so unprofitable a speculation. I touched the church gate through which Mary and I had returned husband and wife. I strolled to the bank of Henlock Water, and sat down there to rest awhile.

Strange, that directly I was still, I felt depressed again—the waves of the sea of uncertainty broke again in hollow murmurs against the shore—I must be stirring—doing. I sprang to my feet, and retraced my steps rapidly—the church-gate, the lead mine, Mr. Wenford's house, before which the servants were standing still, were passed again—I was approaching the Ferry Inn once more.

The Nettlewood waters were glistening in the sun as I approached; the ferry boat was coming towards our side of the stream—Jabez's man was rowing quietly to shore; Jabez, preserving rather an excited aspect, was on the platform awaiting his man's arrival.

I proceeded to Jabez at once.

"You have recovered your boat, I see."

"John had to go all round to Mr. Vaughan's, and borrow his boat to cross, and then take Mr. Vaughan's home; and your brother wanting to cross the Ferry all the while, and a-bullying o' me, as if I could help the fool's trick that summun's played me! I'll be doon upon summun for this."

"My brother has not gone?" I asked.

"But he ha'," was the response; "John's just tooked him across. If ye'll wait a bit, Mr. Gear, he'll be seen round the turn of the Gap, yonder."

"Did he leave any message?"

"Only that he couldn't stop till you came back. Mr. Vaughan knows more, perhaps."

"Mr. Vaughan!—where is he?"

"In the parlour, waiting for you, sir, He has been here this hour."

"Why didn't you say so before?"

I turned indignantly from Jabez, and passed into the best parlour of the Ferry Inn. There I stood, and held my breath with wonder at the scene before me.

My wife was crouched upon the floor almost at her brother's feet, as though she had been kneeling to him, and, failing in entreaty, had given way,

and hidden her face with her hands to hide her bitter grief away from him. She was sobbing very heavily when I entered; her long fair hair had become disordered, and was hanging over her face and hands—a golden shower. Herbert Vaughan, erect and motionless, stood by her side, with a letter in his hand. He turned a haggard, yet a stern face to me as I entered.

“I have been waiting for you, Gear,” he said.

My wife sprang to her feet, and ran towards me.

“Oh! let me tell him in my own way,” she said, to her brother; “I, who understand him so much better than you!”

“Mary, I do not shrink at the manner of relating any misfortune—if there be one in store for us. I am not a child,” I answered.

“It is so heavy—it is so unprepared for!”

“I am prepared—don’t fear.”

“What is his misfortune to mine!—his loss to my own!” cried Vaughan, sternly.

“Ellen—it’s about Ellen?” I said, eagerly.

“Yes.”

“Dead!” I exclaimed.

“If she were,” said Vaughan, bitterly, “it would be a blessing to us both. No, sir, simply dishonoured.”

"It's a lie!" I shouted.

Vaughan coloured, but he did not lose his temper. He was as stern as fate, and my raving did not shake his immobility. At my vehemence, my wife shrank back from me.

"My despair is beyond your empty passion, and will outlive it," he said, with dignity; "when you are calmer, I will go on."

"Go on, Mr. Vaughan. I am calm now."

"Your sister left Mrs. Ray's last night—to return home for a few moments for her jewels and my money, and then departed from my house for ever."

"Leaving no reason?"

"This letter, which was left on my library-table, to await my return from Mrs. Ray's."

He placed it in my hands; I tore it open, and read these lines—

"Nettlewood House, July 20th, 18—.

"Twelve o'clock.

"I must leave you. Life, here, embittered by your want of love, your cruelty, is worse than death. In this house, the same spell that weighed down your sister, and drove her to my brother's arms, drives me from right, and leads me on to

seek my fate. All is forgiven on my side. Some day, thinking of the step which leads me thus away from you, and of the share you had in it, you will forgive me too. For the last time

“Your unhappy wife,

“ELLEN.”

I read and re-read this, and could not catch the meaning. All was so sudden and improbable; the motive for the unnatural step was so darkly figured in these tragic lines. I knew alone that she had gone of her own wild will away from him, and that the mystery around us all was very dense indeed.

“It is incomprehensible,” I gasped.

“It is the easiest thing in all the world to guess at,” he retorted; “the vilest woman has some excuse to offer for a sinful step, and *she* knew the world would talk of her. She charges me with want of love and cruelty; she talks of a spell upon the house, in the language of a romancist rather than a sober woman; and then, with these flimsy pretexts for her guilt, she dashes down to ruin!”

“I will not have this, Vaughan!” I cried; “as her brother, knowing and valuing her more than you, I demand you to pause before you thus con-

demn her. There is no evil thought herein that I can see—but much that tells me of a great unhappiness under which her woman's strength gave way."

"She was not unhappy with me—ask my servants, Janet, any one who has seen us day by day. You did not know and value her more than I. She had strength to bear with home until the whisper of my ruin began to circulate in Nettlewood."

"False!—unfair!"

He played his trump card then. With the same rigidity of demeanour, the same iciness that spoke of a determination impossible to change, he drew from his breast pocket a second letter, and flung it on the table before me.

"Her paramour is more explicit."

I seized that second letter, and wrenched it open likewise. I was dying for any light upon the darkness of the way before me. This was more convincing, and struck a heavier blow.

"July 20, 18—.

"Forgive me and my betrayal of a trust, but the tide's too strong for me. For the sake of our old friendship, I have fought an unequal fight and am vanquished. I am really Mad Wenford now

—to all intents and purposes as raving mad as any lunatic from Hanwell. Ellen accompanies me.

“NED WENFORD.”

“Enough, Mr. Vaughan. Spare me all further proof, if there be any yet remaining.”

“You are convinced of my lasting shame and hers?”

“God knows,” I cried, fighting wildly with my doubts, “I am convinced of nothing!”

I flung the letters to the floor; he picked them up carefully, and secured them in the breast-pocket of his coat. The action attracted me.

“Will you leave those letters with me? I should like to read them again—to study them.”

“They are too valuable evidence for me to risk their loss,” he said; “I will forward you copies in the course of the day.”

“Do you think I would steal them?”

“There might be a temptation to destroy them—you are the champion of your sister’s honour,” he said, mockingly.

I lost command of my temper again at this.

“There is a devilish calmness which hinders me from pitying you!” I cried; “a mocking triumph beneath your stoicism that tells me you were pre-

pared for this—that you lured her on to this, and knew as surely as herself where the end would inevitably lead! Man! if you saw this and did not put forth your power to stop her—if, by your cruelty, you made your home unbearable to her—you are the assassin of her moral life, and will answer for it to your God!”

He stood there listening calmly with a watchfulness in his brown eyes lest I should aim a blow at him. His lips compressed when I uttered the word “assassin,” but the mocking air wreathed them before the last word had passed my own. He was cold and statuesque throughout the interview.

“My time for raving was over hours ago,” said he; “for yours I make allowance now. Say what you will, taunt me in my heavy trouble as you will, the words can sting me not. In the sober time when you, like me, must look at this with different eyes, you will think more justly. Your pity is for the undeserving—I have but my bitter wrong to study. We stand on different grounds, Gear.”

It was difficult to answer him. His was the vantage ground, and I was beneath him then. And my pity *was* for Ellen!

And yet, if he had betrayed one evidence of sorrow at the loss of her, given vent to one paroxysm of anger at the shame he had inherited by hers, I could have seized his hand and asked to work with him—to help him. But that rigidity, that hardness which repelled all sympathy, turned me from him—even against him.

“It is a mystery,” I murmured; “leave me with it.”

“Another time, when you are disposed to be more charitable,” he said, “we may discuss this fact. That is,” he corrected, “if that discussion side not with the guilty woman who has left my home. To speak of her with pity, and demand my sympathy, is to seal my lips for ever on the subject—to end all intimacy between us.”

“Let it end, sir,” I said, my warmth of manner coming back again in spite of me; “what has your intimacy done for me, but to render me distrustful of you? Let it end, sir—there is no one in the world I care less to call my friend!”

“This is the world’s charity,” said Vaughan; “had she not been your sister, you would have been the first to set the laugh against me—to jest with your friends at the admirable manner in which she stole away.”

"Think so if you will, sir."

"Well, sir," he added, continuing his theme, "it is natural enough. To remember that you are my wife's brother will not add to the intensity of my affection for you, though I could forget—which I will not till my dying day—the hand of sympathy extended to me here. Good day."

"How will you act?—what is to be done?" I asked.

"I move not a hair's breadth," he said; "she is beyond all help."

I felt that, although I strove against the thought. I sat down at the table, and leaned my forehead on my hand to brood on this. I had no more to say to him, no more to ask. He stood for a moment looking at me, as at some curious phenomenon that puzzled him, and then with the same unmoved countenance he passed out into the sunlight. The moment afterwards, I was at the window watching him. He held me spell-bound, and I could not shake him from my mind. Before Ellen—before my suffering wife, that man was paramount, and took the preference. I watched him—a dark figure in the sunshine, out of place and unreal, beyond all human comprehension. Words that he had spoken, acts that he had done

yesternight crowded upon me, and shut out all pity for him ; there was a something more akin to hate for him, strengthening within me. No pity when I saw him pause, and press his two hands to his temples, as though a dart had struck him there—when he reeled a little in his walk before he mustered strength to go on again past the clump of trees, where the road turned, and I lost him.

Between me and all sympathy for him were Ellen's farewell words to me ; they never rung more truly, forcibly in my ears, than in that hour when I stood watching at the window. They came back, word for word, not to give me hope to solve the mystery, but yet to keep some remnant of past faith in Ellen clinging to me still.

"In the future, when they speak against me, and I am dead, or not by to answer them, reserve your judgment, and trust in God's good time to give the lie to them. The mists are closing round me, and I cannot see my way !"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE FIRST QUARREL.

I TURNED from the window, and remembered Mary for the first time. In the half protest, half recrimination that had characterized my interview with Vaughan, she had been wholly forgotten.

She was standing near a small side table, with her hands clasped upon it, and her eyes intently fixed on the garish tea-tray with which it was ornamented. All the past interview she had stood there, and listened, keeping ever her gaze averted from us, but drinking in each word with greedy eagerness. Looking at her then, she seemed to me as one stunned by a heavy blow; a woman whose powers of comprehension had not

returned yet to give her full knowledge of all that had disgraced us.

"Mary," I said, in a low voice.

She looked at me then—came slowly, almost timidly towards me, and held forth both arms.

"Oh! take me to your heart, and comfort me," she moaned.

"Why do you ask for comfort?"

"I have done wrong. My God, I did not know how wrong until this hour."

I held her at arm's length in lieu of folding her to my breast. I was a tyrant, who had no mercy that day—who, for woman's weakness, tolerated no excuse.

"Wrong—what wrong?"

"I should have warned you of him."

"My instincts warned me that there was danger in him, Mary?"

"I should have warned you," she repeated.

"Go on—what more?"

Her scared face was upturned to mine; upon it was a look of agony I could not fathom yet.

"Nothing," she answered.

"Is that true? — is there more mystery to pierce?"

"Don't hold me thus!—don't look like that!"

she cried; "it is my brother's face, with all its hate of me come back."

"You were kneeling to him when I entered. What was that for?"

The look of agony was more intense. She tried to wrestle from me then, but my hands still held her firmly.

"Kneeling kneeling!" she gasped.

"Mary, is there any truth that you dare shrink from telling me—you of all women in the world?"

"I cannot tell you this."

"*You shall!*"

"No, no! For your own sake, for your peace hereafter, so help my God, I will not!"

Her eyes dilated as she looked at me—there was defiance, yet horror in her face. My firmness roused her own, and set her against me for the first—the last time! Surely an evil spirit had possessed me that day—where was the self-command which had earned me in old days the name of Patience Gear—where was my husband's love, solicitude, and charity? I was beside myself, and I stamped my foot upon the floor. I felt her wince, too, beneath my coward's grasp.

"It is a secret?"

"Yes."

"I will have no more of it. I am tired of mystery, and the jugglery of this half-confidence, which still more deceives me. I will have my answer, or"—I reiterated her own awful oath—"I lose my trust in you! The truth—the whole truth—that bars my way to Ellen, or a curse upon the marriage which has borne such bitter fruit as this."

"Mercy!"

She sank through my hands towards the floor—I saw her eyes close, and a pallor as of death steal over her. There flashed to my heated brain a sense of all my cowardice, and inconsiderateness towards her.

"Mary, forgive me—look up at me! I am a villain and a fool, and have been raving in a dream!"

Jabez opened the door at my excited tone of voice.

"Did you call, sir?"

"Water!—quick! Mrs. Gear has fainted!"

Jabez disappeared, and reappeared again, followed by the maid-servant who had succeeded Letty in the household duties."

"Ye'd better leave her to me," she said, "a

moment, please. If I can't bring her to, I'll screech."

Jabez and I went out of the room ; Jabez, full of a new idea, set off running down the high-road. I called out to him, but he took no heed. Presently the woman's face peered through the half-opened door, at which I stood a sentinel.

"I can't bring loife to her—it's beyon' me."

I dashed into the room, to begin my old appeal to her, to wring my hands over her, to raise her in my arms and support her head against my breast.

"I'll burn some feythurs—I'll—oh ! lor' a mussy, what shall I do, sir?"

The girl had become frightened, and seemed inclined to imitate her master's example and run away.

"More water !" I shouted ; "don't you see the glass is empty ?"

But water was in vain—she lay in my arms like a dead woman.

"Run for the chemist, or whatever he is, in the cottage at the corner there !"

"I think the measter's gone."

She was right. Jabez, and a weak-minded old man, who dealt in drugs and groceries, entered

whilst she still lay motionless. The new comer looked at her, and lost his presence of mind at once.

"I—I don't know much about it," he stammered ;
"I think I'd take her up to her room—I—I never saw such a swoond as that !"

"Who lives at Henlock ?" I cried.

"Doctor Haynes—a clever man. He was the family doctor of the Vaughans and Zitmans, and is used to her."

"Saddle a horse, Jabez, and ride as for your life ! For *her* life, which is at stake here !"

I bore her upstairs to her room. Do I know how I passed the time till Doctor Haynes's carriage rattled towards the Ferry ?—were they not years, wherein I raved and called down vengeance on my madness ?

He bustled into the room—the sick room's genius. I could have shouted with joy at his appearance, as though he brought life and health along with him. He was a big burly man, of seventy years of age, with hair as white as snow—a handsome gentleman, whom I had noticed last night for a moment at the Rays' gathering. He stopped and looked attentively at Mary, taking

her hand from mine, and applying his fingers to her wrist.

"Again!" he muttered, "after all these years."

"Again!" I mechanically repeated.

"Not so many years, after all," he said, turning to me; "but she was Mr. Zitman's wife, and then a widow of twelve hours old. More of a child than wife or widow, poor girl!"

"She has been subject to these stupors?"

"Yes."

"Thank God!"

The doctor laughed rather unsympathetically.

"That's an odd thing to thank God for, Mr. Gear."

"I feared that I had killed her."

"Oh! no," regarding me with a dubious expression, "she will recover in an hour or two. It's a fainting fit of some duration. Has she been excited?"

"Yes."

"Ah! I thought so. Is there a woman about?"

"The girl downstairs."

"She's a fool. Send for the bony woman—Jane or Janet—at Nettlewood House. She understands her, and is the best of nurses."

I felt my heart lighten at this suggestion.

Janet, the old nurse, the old friend who had loved her so long, was the fitting woman at this time. I wondered that I had not thought of her before.

A messenger was despatched; I was left to wander in and out of the room wherein she lay so still, with the doctor and the maid-servant doing their best in vain.

In a short while—it seemed an age to me—the tall angular form of Janet Muckersie stood in the doorway. She was as pale and haggard as her master had been; in her strange love for him did she take her share of the trouble and shame which had fallen on the house of Vaughan? Her deep-set eyes gravely surveyed me as I expressed my satisfaction at her arrival. A consciousness of all that had happened between me and my wife, she seemed to guess by intuition. I shrank from the cold criticism to which I was exposed.

“Be a’ the troubles coomin’ at aince?” she said; “what ha’ happened?”

“Mary has fainted. We cannot bring her back to consciousness.”

“Did they quarrel—the bairn and she?” she asked quickly.

“No—I believe not.”

“Not ye twa!” she said more eagerly; “any-

thin' rather nor that, I'd care to hear just noo."

"Janet," I confessed, "I have acted like a villain. It has all arisen from the dreadful news which Vaughan brought here, and which has turned my brain, I think."

"News of Mrs. Vaughan?" she said gloomily.

"Yes."

"Ah! news o' horror—*them*. But," putting me aside with her strong arm, "let me see the lassie noo—I may be o' help to her."

She passed into the room, and closed the door somewhat precipitately in my face.

"We'll send for ye prisently, Measter Gear," she muttered.

The doctor and Janet remained a long while in that chamber, the door of which was closed against me. A prey to a suspense from which I hope ever to be spared again, I went downstairs and wandered about the lower rooms, from the tap-room to the best room, thence to the back parlour and kitchen, back once more to the scene of conflict between my wife and me. The spirit of unrest was on me—my morbid feelings were acute enough to torture me with the belief that she would pass from her stupor into the valley of death, and make no further sign.

When the suspense was driving me mad, the good news came that she was slowly recovering. The doctor brought me the tidings, and arrested my fitful wanderings about the house.

"I think she'll do now, Mr. Gear," he said; "I shall look in again in the course of an hour."

"May I see her?"

"It is not judicious," he remarked; "her recovery from these stupors has been always marked by some mental aberration, and to disturb her at the time is dangerous."

"When am I to see her then?"

"In good time, my dear sir. Ask Janet."

I stole up to the bed-room door again, and knocked softly—very softly—on the panel. Janet opened the door a few inches, and looked through at me.

"Na yet," she said gruffly.

"Speak to her of me—tell her how wretched I am—how truly wretched at my own fool's anger."

"Preesently—she is na well eno' to care muckle for yeer messages. Wha's doon stairs?"

"Jabez and the servant."

"Send to the Hoose, and tell them that I dinna leave here a' the day—verra likely a' the night. They need na expect to see me till I coom."

"Janet—*is* she very ill?"

"She will be better soon, please God."

"*Some one is crossing the ferry—Canute, Canute!*" murmured a voice from within. Janet closed the door at once, and shut out that plaintive cry, so terribly suggestive of last night's doubts, and the awful truths by which they had been succeeded.

All that long day I was debarred from seeing her. The doctor came again, and looked more grave on returning from the sick-room.

"Is she not better?" I asked.

"Not yet. Her brain is disturbed still; fever, I fear, is on the increase. Janet will not go back to-night."

Later in the day he came again, and looked a shade more grave still. Towards evening a messenger arrived from Nettlewood House; "Mr. Vaughan would be glad to know how his sister was." Hearing she was no better, the messenger added, that "Janet was on no account to leave Mrs. Gear."

Later again, when the night was dark, and the wind had risen, the doctor came a fourth time and left his last injunctions for the night. He sought me out before his departure.

"She is less restless, and appears inclined to sleep," he said; "but I would not attempt to see her to-night, Mr. Gear."

"What possible harm can accrue from my seeing her if she remain unconscious?" I asked.

"She will recognize you as she does Janet and me. But the recognition cannot be beneficial, and may lead to irreparable harm."

"Enough, sir—I will not attempt to see her."

I sat down, prepared to face the worst. If it had come that night I could have met it, I had such little hope of brighter times from that day. I wanted neither food nor rest; books could not distract my mind an instant; Ellen's flight from home appeared to have happened years ago, and to have become a misty retrospect. My whole soul was merged in the illness of my wife, and all that had suddenly led to it.

Jabez came in twice or thrice after the Ferry Inn was closed for the night, to ask if I wished for dinner, tea, or supper—all of which I had neglected—if he should prepare a bed for me in another room, if there were any orders of any kind whatever, which he could cheerfully fulfil. My stony apathy weighed upon this honest man; it was out of the regular course of things, and

Jabez and I had become good friends. I had listened to Jabez's hundred and one complaints about the business, and the repairs, and lowered his rent to meet the hardness of the times, and I think Jabez would have gone farther, and done more for me, than for most people.

My negatives to everything perplexed him ; my advice to him that he should leave me sitting up, he was inclined to object to ; but there was no altering my resolution, and, after telling me that the maid was ready to help Janet if required, he left me to my solitary watch.

CHAPTER IX.

JANET.

How the wind howled that night! It shrieked amongst the mountains; it came moaning up the Vale, and round the Ferry Inn; it rushed against the house full front and rocked it as I sat there. Rain came with it after a while, dashed against the window-panes, rattled fitfully without amongst the trees, and kept up a steady, heavy dropping from the eaves.

It was a night congenial to my frame of mind; there was a restlessness about its stormy character which suited, even composed me. Why should stars be shining and summer zephyrs whispering

in the Vale when all within my heart was of the veriest depth and gloom?

The door opened silently, and Janet came in. She drew a chair to the table, and sat down at a little distance from me. She was looking very aged and worn.

"How is she, Janet?"

"Snatching at sleep in raal faver fashion," she returned; "I ha' left her, as she's a bit calmer, mayhap, to coom to ye."

"I may not see her, then?" I said.

"I would na. It's a queer kind of 'lirium, and a straw turns her in sic keends of doonstrokes. She wad ken ye, and it'd a' coom back agin, and she'd be warse."

"I will sit here patiently."

"I've coom to sit wi' ye a moment," she said, with a half sigh that did not escape me.

"Janet—do you fear any danger?"

"N—na," she said, in a hesitative manner, "I canna say I do *yet*. Bide a wee—this is na patience, sir."

"How is it that I have never heard of these stupors before?"

"I canna sae. P'raps she thocht that she'd lived

them doon, as she micht hae doon—as I beleaved she wad.”

There was a pause, broken but by the sougning of the wind outside. Janet was scarcely satisfied, however; she got up and listened at the door, and then returned again.

“I ken the time when these swoonds came verra aften—far too aften to be alwa’ roonin’ after Doctor Haynes. When an angry word at last wud do it, and when, to keep the truth frae her—when it war a hard truth—war the best and the keendest meethod. Wi’ ye, Maister Gear,” looking sadly at me, “I did hope to hear na mair o’ this.”

“I have been wrong. God forgive me!”

“Her puir head burns like a coal,” said Janet; “gin it turns to brain faver, there’s a hard feight for her—and I sae muckle to do!”

“Janet—you will not leave us?”

“In this trooble—is it like me? Hae I been sae lang true to the Vaughans, that I shad shreenk frae my duty at a time like this?”

“But your master—”

“He wull spare me—he wull be glad to spare me.”

She edged her chair nearer to me, and laid her large hand on my arm.

"Tell me how it a' happened—what did ye twa find to quarrel aboot?"

I told her word for word—excusing nothing, urging no word of extenuation. She listened with her customary stolidity, but there was an eagerness in her eyes that was new to me.

"Ye dinna luv the bairn—ye suspect him still?"

"Yes," I answered.

"Ye do not peety him e'en noo—ye beleeve that he war na keend to his wife, and she war dreeven like frae hame?"

"What else can I believe?"

"I ha' kenned that mon frae childhood. I ha' prayed far him ever since he war a wee thing in my arms!"

"I have known Ellen from an infant too—I have found her ever the same—high-spirited, pure-minded, striving ever to do good."

"I ne'er understood her," was the cold reply.

I thought the subject had tired her, for she rose again and listened at the door. I was feverishly impatient for her to go, and not leave my wife so long to the charge of the stupid maid-servant; her harsh voice jarred upon me, and irritated me—

her defence of Herbert Vaughan, and her lukewarm interest in his wife, seemed to bring back to me some of the excitement of the morning.

My heart sank when she came back and resumed her seat facing me.

"It's a awfu' nicht!" she said, shivering a little; "how the weend and rain come doon the valley like twa mad theengs. She war high-speerited," she added, reverting to the past subject with a startling precipitancy; "ay, she war prood, and stood aloof, and wud na trust in me. I war her husband's spy, tellin' him everythin' and bringin' on na end of troobles, she thought. Puir lassie, puir lassie, if she had kenned all, what a different end it might ha' been for her! If I'd let her see—if I'd only let her see that I war larnin' to luv her, to ask her o' my ain free will to let me be her freend."

"You saw her unhappiness, Janet?"

"It is an unhappy hoose—it's haunted by an evil speerit."

"It is."

"Na—not him! I did na' say *him*—bear me weetness," she cried, starting to her feet, "ye war alwa' hatin' him in yeer heart, and ye're na an hoonest judge."

"Is Ellen guilty?—woman, had she no excuse to fly?"

"Is there ana' excuse feettin' an act like hers?"

I saw the evasion, and with that stern persistence which had already worked such mischief, I would not have it thrust forward as an answer.

"Janet, as you are an honest and God-fearing woman, had my sister Ellen no excuse to fly?"

"Ye wull worry me wi' na mair questions—ye will let 'em a' end, sae far as I, a puir servant, am consarned?"

"Yes."

"*Then she ha'!* She war in meesery, and would ha' deed there. She had a richt to flee frae death, I think. But I ken naethin'," she added, "I'm a fulish woman, and oh! my heart is sair awfu' heavy. Never in a' my leef to smile agin, to feel as in the auld days when I war Mary's comforter! What's that!"

The maid-servant came tumbling into the room, with her eyeballs protruding and her cap awry.

"I can't sit there and hear her any longer," she cried; "please go up and see to her, and stop her talking. I ain't the nerve—I'm going to be ill myself, I think—my blood runs awfu' cold! She said——"

"Begon'!" shouted Janet, running at her, and brandishing one hand in her face; "begon', I say!"

"Hush!" I cried, "she calls you."

My voice, harsh and imperative, arrested Janet and the inn servant. In the pause, the silvery voice of the sick woman thrilled its way towards us.

"Janet, Janet, I say."

To my surprise, Janet's sepulchral voice gave answer.

"I am coomin'—patience—*seelence, dear.*"

"He is crossing the ferry—there's murder—murder—murder in his looks!"

The servant-maid gasped for breath, and wrung her hands with fear. I sprung to my feet when Janet's face—it was the face of a ghost!—warned me back.

"Keep there, sir. The rain and wind sair disturb her. Dinna follow, for her leef's sake."

Janet stole away, and in her forgetfulness shut the servant-maid in with me. The girl dropped on to the extreme edge of the chair near the door, and looked piteously towards me.

"If I ony might sit here, sir, and say nothing. I've been scared a'most to death."

"Sit there, if you will."

"When people's heads is turned, what makes them think of murder, sir?"

"I don't know—don't speak—I'm weary."

So the night passed, and the light burned low. It was a relief to see the grey morning come again, though it brought but little hope with it. The servant was lolling in the chair, with her head hanging over the back, asleep and snoring—but my red eyes faced the daylight, and my discontented spirit felt as though peace and rest were gone for ever from me.

CHAPTER X.

ILLNESS.

THE fever of the brain, dreaded alike by the doctor and Janet, set in next day; there was danger to her life; but a little way distant seemed the rock on which a life-long happiness might split.

I gave up hope myself; I was inclined to think the worst, and there was a horrible satisfaction in asserting that all hope was over, and there could come never again a gleam of brighter times for me. Neither the doctor nor Janet despaired, but I would not listen to them, and I believe they feared that my own brain was on the turn. But they did not know, they could never guess, the

depth and intensity of my love for the sufferer. That love had been born of romance; it had been strengthened by her noble sacrifice for me; it had become a part of my moral being, and I must die without it. In the reality of those few angry words I could scarcely believe now; to charge myself with striking at her weakness, with adding to a trouble that had come upon her and had borne her down before my dastard conduct overwhelmed her, seemed part of a dream in the wild unrealities of which I still was labouring.

In the midst of this great trouble, my mother came and took her place beside me. We did not speak of Ellen for several days; but the mother had aged marvellously since I had seen her last, and I knew whose fault it was! She would speak to me only of Mary, endeavour by every way to give me that hope to which I turned a deaf ear, or which I sternly asserted was but a mockery to offer me.

One of the chief missions she had purposed in coming to the Ferry Inn was to nurse my wife as the one faithful daughter left her; but Janet interposed, and with a fierceness provoked by opposition, would not allow her entrance to the cham-

ber. Janet seemed worn out herself by constant watching; the only sleep she obtained was by fitful snatches in her chair at the bedside; food or drink was hard to press upon her. She was a woman whose soul was in my wife's recovery, and who strove for it, fought for it, and would have no interference. More than once she had differed with the doctor's advice, and adopted some little change of her own, which was always for the better—her rule was absolute in the sick-chamber.

From the chamber I was no longer debarred. I had forced my way in, and taken up my silent watch beside the invalid. She had lost all consciousness then of passing things—neither my face nor Janet's did she recognize. She lay and tossed on her bed, and raved of things incomprehensible to me, but which I noticed, more than once, made Janet start, as though they were allusions to that past in which I had never shared. My name, her brother, Ellen, Janet, even her first husband's, were constantly upon her lips; in her fevered world our shadows, doubtless, pressed upon her, and would allow no rest. To these ravings I paid no attention; I was content to watch her, to hold her hand in mine, to fancy, more than once, that

her eyes *did* beam with a recognition of me, and that there were times even when she knew I kept my constant vigil there.

They interfered at last with me—Janet and the doctor. They told me that my presence there distracted Mary, and that whilst she remained excited I must add to her wild fancies. They spoke of greater peace to her when I was absent; they reasoned with me on the folly of thus watching her; they allowed me but a passing glimpse of her, once or twice a day; and forced me to my mother's love and care, as though I were the child again who needed them. All this was for my own sake, I learned afterwards; but they played their parts well, and deceived me.

A servant from Nettlewood House came every morning to inquire after the health of Mrs. Gear, but the brother did not again face me, or betray, by his presence at the Ferry, any undue anxiety for his sister's welfare. Mrs. Ray was much more excited by the news; she came every morning in the carriage to the door of the Ferry Inn, and asked for me. The first words were generally,

"Don't say, she isn't better this morning, now?"

"No better," was my answer.

"I want to see her—I must see her, mind you!"

"Presently. I have spoken to Janet, and she will have no visitors in the sick-room yet awhile."

"If she's going to die, I must see her," she said; "and Janet shan't keep me out. Where is that woman?—can't she send a civil message to her betters?"

Janet appeared one day, and quite a war of words ensued between these women—Mrs. Ray demanding admittance to Mary's side, Janet sternly refusing it.

"Mind you," began Mrs. Ray, "I will see her. I'll creep up the stairs some of these fine mornings."

"Ye'll stand a chance o' bein' flung doon 'em, Mrs. Ray."

"You lay a finger on me, if you dare!"

"I'll lay ten."

"You were allus an imperent woman, but you ought to know better, now I'm a lady and keep my carriage."

"Ye're Mrs. Ray still," was the disparaging reply.

"I'm Mary Gear's friend, remember that," said

Mrs. Ray, becoming excited, and shaking one gloved fist from the window. "We are the best of friends, and she'll be glad to see me, any time."

"When she saes thot, ye shall coom oopstairs," said Janet, drily.

She left Mrs. Ray to digest that answer, and the old woman, after considering it for some time, beckoned me to the carriage side.

"That big brute of a woman can't do your wife any good," said Mrs. Ray; "shall I come and nus her, Mr. Gear?"

"Thank you. She is in good hands."

"That Janet was allus a rough 'un—we never agreed. Mr, Gear, when may I come and see your wife, now?"

"You must ask the doctor, if you are not contented with Janet's answer."

"I'll go to the doctor at once."

She was giving orders to drive to Henlock, when, remembering something, she turned to me again.

"I'd nearly forgot that, Mr. Gear."

I returned again.

"They're going on anyhow at my place—all sixes and sevens—with the alterations, now you're

sitting here, idling time away in a pot-house. I'm thinking you might save me a mite of money, by looking arter the wretches, just a little. It isn't far to come, you know."

The reproof was just enough, though far from delicately conveyed. I was but half a mile from the house; there was no necessity for my constant presence at the Inn; the alterations were likely to go wrong when my supervision was entirely withdrawn; time and money were equally being wasted.

"I'll come to-morrow," said I wearily.

Mrs. Ray brightened up at this, and forgot her disappointment in being excluded from my wife's apartments.

On the morrow I went, and the change from the listless inaction of the past week did me a certain amount of good. There had been some blunders committed in my absence, and, setting myself to rectify them, distracted, for a while, my thoughts from the one subject which separated my interest even from Ellen, and the world.

I began to entertain a faint hope that, after all, fate would not sweep away everything I loved and cared for—that Mary, by God's help, would be restored to bless my life again.

The doctor spoke hopefully, the following day, of her recovery ; the fever was abating—she had slept long and quietly the night preceding—she was less restless in the morning. This good news I took to Mrs. Ray, who, strangely anxious about her, always made her appearance in the grounds immediately I arrived. The daughter, Letty, I saw but seldom.

“ I’m glad of it—I’m glad of it,” said Mrs. Ray, rapping her stick on the ground. “ Good lor ! to think that I should have ever been glad of Mary Zitman getting better ! I prayed that she might die, once,” she added, hoarsely.

Seeing me shrink from her, she said,

“ In the old times afore I got rich ; when Letty and I struggled hard to live. It’s different now I’m comfor’ble—not that I’m much happier, but I’m comfor’ble—very ! I’m getting awfully old though—and, oh ! the drefful swimmings in my head. I shall flop out of the world all of a heap, mind you—and it worries me to think o’ that. When may I see your wife, now ? ” she added suddenly.

“ Very shortly, I hope.”

“ I didn’t have a very nice dream about her last night—I thought she got a little better, just

to deceive people, and then went off in a flash."

"That will do—no more of that!" I cried.

"I can't rest—oh! Mr. Gear, I shall never rest until I've seen her," she said. "You will try and get over that brute of a woman, with the man's voice, won't you, now?"

"I'll do my best for you."

The next day there came real hope—the hope that we could understand, and thank God for. My mother, ever a sensitive woman, burst into tears—I was unsettled, and could do nought that day but wander up and down the water's side.

The fever at the brain had left Mary—but she was very weak, and it was necessary that still greater care than ever should be exercised.

Her first wish was to see me, and, with Janet's watchful eyes upon us both, I was allowed to approach her bedside.

"My poor Canute, this has been a hard trial to you!" she whispered.

"Followed by a great blessing, Mary."

"I am glad to come back to life again for your sake."

"Ah! what would life be without you?"

"You are not angry with me now?" she asked timidly.

"Angry!"

She lay watching me with her great earnest eyes—once a long quivering sigh escaped her. She seemed summoning courage to speak of something, when the grim sentinel said,

"It's time ye war gane, sir."

"One moment, Janet, please," my wife urged.

"A moment only, then."

"Ellen"—she whispered—"has she been heard of?"

I shook my head.

I saw her face become a shade more pale—more of an ashen grey—and then Janet had thrust me aside, and was holding a glass of water to her lips.

"If ye want to kill her, Mr. Gear," she grumbled, "ye ha' better stay a leetle langer noo."

But every hour Mary gathered some degree of strength—in a few days it was promised that I should sit with her an hour or two, and that seemed to give her courage, and me composure. But when the time arrived, though she was strong enough to bear my presence at her side, I saw

the shadow of a new trouble on her face the while. There was a concentrative thought impressed upon it; it amounted almost to an unhappy look!

Janet would not leave us together, although I very plainly intimated that her absence would be preferred.

"Ye'll get talkin' o' the auld story, and I'll na ha' it yet. Ye twa thegither need an' awfu' lot o' watchin'."

Mary smiled faintly.

"If it had na' been for the watching, what would have become of me, Janet?"

"Hech! that's doubtfu'."

"We have to thank this dear old faithful friend with all our hearts, Canute."

"With all our hearts!" I echoed, warmly.

"Naethin' to thank me for," said Janet, "ain't I boond to ye—wadna I wark for a Vaughan at any time, in any trooble? I'm strang, and there's na wark in the warld hard eno' to beat me doon."

"You will change places with my mother now?" I suggested, "she is very anxious to relieve guard, now and then, Janet."

"I'll see the lassie on her feet fust," said Janet, "afore I leave the Ferry Inn. I dinna mind yer mither cooming and sitting here an hoor or twa,

weel I get a leetle rest, but she munna stand atween me and the lassie I've brought back to leef."

"She does not wish that, Janet,"

Janet was still jealous of intruders ; she kept her watch, honest and vigilant, and did not speak of returning to Nettlewood House. Hope for me grew more strong—the dark clouds round *my* life at least, rolled slowly back, although closer to me came the mystery of Ellen's disappearance, the shame of Ellen's flight. In the good time when Mary would be strong again, there was that story to follow to the end, there was Ellen to discover and bring back, a penitent to her mother's arms. If she had fled to a greater sorrow in her escape from a home made wretched by her husband's conduct, there was a love strong enough to seek her out, and cast a veil over the guilty retrospect.

I was thinking of Ellen when I met her husband at Mrs. Ray's. It was a characteristic meeting, and showed how much further apart we had taken our positions since he brought the worst of news to me. We bowed very stiffly, but made no pretence of friendship by hand-shaking.

"To remember that I was his wife's brother was

not to add to the intensity of his affection for me," was his own confession.

Mrs. Ray, her daughter Letty, and he were in the grounds when I arrived; they had been inspecting the exterior of the new library, at which the men were working busily.

Mrs. Ray turned to me with her old eagerness.

"Better—again?"

"Yes, much better, thank you."

"And I may see her to-night?"

"To-morrow morning, perhaps, in Janet's presence, if you don't object to it."

"I'd rather see her in the devil's!" was Mrs. Ray's emphatic comment. "Why, Janet?—allus Janet? Don't the woman sleep at all?"

"She rests in the evening, whilst my mother relieves guard."

"*She* seems a decentish, good-tempered body," said Mrs. Ray. "Why don't you bring her up to tea with me? She'd be society to me—my darter isn't worth much, goodness knows."

She looked at Letty, who laughed and said:

"By-and-bye, I shall be better company, mother. Keep your new trust in me, just for a little while."

The tone of voice was new—the manner was

new likewise. Looking at Letty Ray more intently, it struck me that her face was brighter and more handsome—that the heaviness thereon had vanished in a great degree. It had been a face impressed with a sombreness that was chilling once.

“Oh! you’re to be trusted in most things, or you wouldn’t be here,” was the rough rejoinder to Letty’s last appeal.

Meanwhile, Herbert Vaughan, who had wandered a little apart from us, and had looked over the terrace to the lower garden, and the water below that, returned to us after some little hesitation.

“I will bid you good-bye, now, Mrs. Ray. Have you any commands in London for me?”

“If you could think of that Cashmere. I should like a real Cashmere round my shoulders before I die, sir.”

“I will not forget it.”

“And Pipp’s Patent Medicine for swimnings in the head—my daughter read it in the *Cumberland Journal*. You’ll think of Pipp’s?”

“Oh! yes.”

He looked hard at me, and addressed me for the first time.

“I am going to London, Mr. Gear, on very

painful business, which you may possibly guess."

"Have you heard from Ellen?" I inquired.

"No—I have not attempted to hear," he replied, still forcing his eyes to swerve not from my own. But it was an effort, and he lowered his glance at last. "Still my business concerns *her*. When I return you will have left here, and in all human probability we shall not meet again. For my sister's sake I may regret this: but you have misunderstood every action of my life, and my ways are not your ways. For that sister's sake, let me at least wish you a prosperous career in life."

"Thank you," I answered.

He shuffled with the toe of one boot in the loose gravel—then looked up at me again.

"Shall we part friends?"

"Whosoever's enemy you may have been, at least you have not studied to injure me, I think," I answered. "But——"

He did not wait for me to conclude. He extended his hand frankly towards me, saying:

"You do me a tardy justice, Mr. Gear, and I thank you. Good day."

"But my sister Ellen stands between me and all thought of friendship," was my answer. "I

cannot understand you; I may have misjudged you, but you walk in a darkness which is impenetrable to me."

I did not take his hand; I turned away. Something at that moment filled me with a horror of him; I remembered in that moment Ellen's unhappiness, his sister's unhappiness before Ellen's time, a hundred incidents which shadowed forth evil in his silent, stealthy life. There had been a cause for Ellen's flight, Janet had confessed, and that man had fostered it.

He looked after me a moment, then shrugged his shoulders, and turned away with Letty. He and Mrs. Ray's daughter went side by side together round the house, leaving the old woman to hobble after me.

"You don't like him?" Mrs. Ray asked.

"Can I be expected to admire him very much?"

"You take your sister's part—well, it's sperited. But I never took very kindly to your sister, though I liked her style of doing things."

"It matters not," was my short reply.

"She was uncommon fond of making game of me behind my back, and taking off Letty, too. I've heard it from twenty people. She no more

cared who she told, than who she offended. So she came to grief."

"We need not speak of her, Mrs. Ray. It is a subject that pains me."

"Let's talk of Mary."

"One moment," I said, "I am a curious man, and your daughter's manner perplexes me. Why has she made a friend of Mr. Vaughan?"

"I don't know," the old woman said, angrily; "because I asked her not, I spose—because I'm sharp enough to see all that he's got in his brain at work. It's a great honour to the likes o' us, but I—I don't like it. He's an unlucky man, and oh!—it's an unlucky house!"

"But—but he is still a married man."

"He's agoing to London on law business—to take steps for a dervorce. There's no doubt of his getting it, he says, and then I—I think he'll want to marry Letty."

A divorce! The whole story laid bare in its hideous details, for scandal-mongers to gloat over for a while until the novelty was somewhat worn. *Her* name held up for bad men's ribaldry, and good men's scorn, and the shame on us—the Gears—burned in a little deeper by publicity.

Well, if the story were true, he was justified, and true or false, I felt powerless to act. Beyond me there was not one clue to find her—if she had been innocent, I thought, a little bitterly; she would have written to us, or have made some sign.

When I went away a few minutes afterwards, Vaughan and Letty were still lingering about the grounds. The courtship was an early one, and he was a married man yet; the days were early too for Vaughan to think of love again—was the night coming on so fast that neither could lose time, and had the lives of Mary Zitman and Ellen Gear read no warning to this new heiress, this easily mistaken woman?

I remember that Mrs. Ray walked by my side as far as the front gate—she had hooked herself to my arm, and it was difficult to shake her off, after that manoeuvre.

“When’s Janet going home?” she asked.

“Shortly, I believe.”

“And she does rest a little bit now—in the evening. If it wasn’t for the night air, and the swimmings, I would try and see your wife before that day or two you spoke of.”

“It’s against the rules.”

“What rules have *I* ever respected?” she murmured, as I left her clinging to the gate, and looking grimly, almost sorrowfully, after me.

CHAPTER XI.

A WINDING-SHEET IN THE CANDLE.

THAT afternoon I obtained permission of Janet to see Mary again. The stern custodian relaxed the severity of her rules when Mary's voice interceded for me, when Mary spoke confidently of her strength to bear my presence now.

"Ye ha' doon her gude by comin'," said Janet to me, "and if ye wull na talk too muckle, and let me watch ye baith aweel, I'll na stand in the wa'."

So I sat by Mary's side that afternoon, and talked in a low tone of the better times and brighter days before us—nothing of the shady side of life, of the sorrows that *must* haunt us till we

lived the mystery down. I did my best to speak of things foreign to the past—which she had always dreaded—to dwell on the success of the firm of Sanderson and Gear, to speak of the old partner's solicitude for Mary's health, of my mother's love and anxiety concerning her.

Mary listened with her thin hand in mine, smiled at my weak efforts at pleasantry, was very happy to know that I was near her, to feel that her getting stronger made *me* so much happier. But there was the look to which I have already alluded on her face still; the strange concentrative look which nothing could soften, which told of a world wherein she lived a separate existence, and on the confines of which I only lingered. I had attempted once to force my way within it, and here was the result in this poor stricken invalid; I had despised the barriers in my way, and in dashing at them with my brutal strength, had struck her down instead! Then she looked at me at times so strangely; the look chilled me, it presaged much, or my excited fancy read much from it. It said to me—

“The days of health and strength are coming back, but the days of confidence between us never. Never together man and wife with one thought in

common; the past forbids it, my fear of you and your happiness"—she had implied this when I had sworn to know the truth—"forbid it, and I have not the courage or will to face the horror that's before me. You will love me; from this time forth you will ever be kind and gentle with me, but there will be a gulf between our inmost hearts, and my woman's love can never bridge it over!"

When Janet had dismissed me, I thought of this downstairs; close to me, with my anxiety for Ellen, was my busy speculation concerning that past on which an interdict was set. I felt amidst it all, that it was approaching nearer to my waking life, and that there would come a shock to one or both of us which would, for good or evil, rend the veil aside. It could not happen of my own free will; for Mary's sake, I dared not move one step towards it; but the end was on its way towards me, and its shadow fell across the path we both pursued.

The rain and the wind came up the valley that night again; there was no settled weather, Nettlewood way. Doors were locked and windows secured against the enemies, and Jabez tied an

extra knot in his rope which secured the ferry boat to its landing stage.

"I shall be glad to get back to Borrowdale," said my mother, shivering a little when the storm was at its height, "I don't like this Nettlewood at all."

"The rain and the wind swoop down Borrowdale as well as Nettlewood to-night, mother."

"Yes, but they don't moan so. I suppose it's the mountain shutting us in at the head of the valley, and stopping the wind from a good rush. Oh! what's that?"

It was only Janet, whose head looked round the door of the best room.

"I be ga'aing to lee doon a bit, Mrs. Gear. The lassie's asleep, and the wind ha rocked her aff quietlike. She'll ring if she wants ye, she saes, but mayhap ye'll creep oop, now and then, and look at her, and leesten if she's moovin'. If she's na happy wi' ye," added Janet rather conceitedly, "mayhap ye'll wake me."

Janet departed, and my mother stole upstairs, presently to descend again with the news that Mary was sleeping very calmly still. The rain and the wind were in full force by that time; the

casements were rattling in their sashes; the doors and floorings creaked; the house rocked a little after its old fashion.

"It's like carriage wheels rattling along," said my mother, as I paused over a fugitive sketch upon which I was employing myself that evening, "but it's not likely people would be riding about Nettlewood to-night. Dear, dear me," she added, "what a place it is for noises, Canute!"

"It is a carriage approaching," I said, after a moment's pause.

My poor mother turned pale on the instant, and clasped her hands together. She had borne up well lately against her great loss, her great sorrow; for my sake she had pressed down in her own mother's heart her fear and agony concerning Ellen—but a breath disturbed her, and anything unusual she connected in a strange way with that daughter who was ever lost to her.

She looked at me, and gasped forth "Ellen," on the instant.

"No, no," I hastened to assert, "there will be no news of Ellen come to us from Nettlewood. That is beyond our hopes."

"Who is riding about to-night? What errand

can bring people here? Oh, Canute, they *are* coming this way!"

I had walked to the door and opened it, when Jabez came down the passage from the back-room.

"Do you expect visitors, Jabez?"

"I doan't knoa what to expect in these toimes," said Jabez, scratching his head; "things be unsettled loike aboot here."

He gave quite a jump when the handle of a stick was applied to the panels of the outer door.

"Who's thot?" he cried. "Speak out, for the wind blows hoigh."

"It's the missus," said a gruff voice without. "Missus Ray. She would coom—she's as mad as can be."

"Where be she?"

"In the carriage, waiting for the door to open—lookee aloive!"

Jabez opened the door, and propped his sturdy shoulder against it; the wind and rain came rushing in upon us; I shut myself in the passage, and then ran to save the door of Jabez's room from banging to and waking my wife; the man who had spoken without hurried back along the wet

path, and presently returned struggling under the burden of Mrs. Ray and a large umbrella, which had turned inside out at the first attempt to raise it.

Setting Mrs. Ray against the door, and placing her stick in her hand, the man clattered off in his heavy boots again, and scrambled into the carriage to escape the wet.

Mrs. Ray looked after him.

"That's like his imperence—he'll let down the front winder, and draw the reins through 'em to save trouble, and spoil all the new lining. He's as lazy a dolt as ever lived. Jabez!"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Get a sack or two to cover them poor horses," she said—"lots o' sacks. Oh, Mr. Gear, is that you?"

She limped forward, and fairly fell into my arms, the crutch-handled stick rattling on the passage floor.

"I've come to see your wife," she said; "I couldn't rest no longer. Where's that Janet?"

"Asleep."

"That's well—take me in your room a moment. I've got such a fluttering in my chest to-night."

I escorted Mrs. Ray into the room, sat her

down, almost like an infant, in the chair I had vacated, returned to the passage for the stick, came back once more, closed the door, and placed the stick beside her. Her appearance then struck me for the first time. She was ghastlier than usual; her face seemed more pinched and haggard; in her eyes there was a wild excitement which was new to me—her hands that were clutching the table made the two mould candles, with which it was surmounted, totter again.

Mrs. Ray had taken no notice of my mother, but was sitting with her bonnet awry, and her fur victorine twisted over her shoulder, staring very intently at the candle lights.

"Mr. Gear, it's here, too. It's coming true—good Lord!"

"What has happened, Mrs. Ray?"

"Look at that there winding-sheet in the candle—ugh, it's awful!"

My mother gave a spasmodic leap in her chair; she had been ever inclined to lean to the superstitious side of things.

"A winding-sheet—good gracious!"

"Ah! you may say, 'good gracious,' mum," said Mrs. Ray, looking towards her for the first time; "they're awful things!—they brought me

here to-night, old and feeble as I am. You're this young man's mother, mum?"

"I am proud to say I am," exclaimed my good mother, on the instant.

"Ah!" with a weary sigh, "it's a comfort to have a dutiful child—I never know'd it—I never shall, now. A child good enough to love you, and strong enough to comfort you in your old age, and not show tempers and cross and spite you, as if you weren't the mother that brought that child into the world! Ah, me!"

She beat her wrinkled hands up and down upon the table, and stared still at the candle, which the strong draught had guttered and formed into the winding-sheet that troubled Mrs. Ray.

"Let me tell you, Mr. Gear," turning to me, "why I came here such an awful night. I was in the housekeeper's-room counting the plate—I like to count the plate myself, with a candle close at my elbow, 'cause my eyes are bad—and Letty was practisin' her peanner in the drawin'-room—*she* practises hard enough, now there's a chance of marryin' that Vaughan."

"Marrying Vaughan!" exclaimed my mother.

"Don't you interrupt people," snapped Mrs. Ray; "that's the tother story, which I haven't

given myself the 'fluency to come and tell *you*."

"Oh!" said my mother, completely silenced by this uncomplimentary remark.

"And I was a-counting and a-counting," Mrs. Ray continued, "and making one silver table short, which was a hard loss, and was trying to recollect who was the biggest thief I'd got in the house, when I noticed—good lor!—I noticed the awfulest winding-sheet I ever seed in my life. I was friz then, and forgot the silver table, and skreeked out, 'Mary Gear's a-going' to die, and I haven't told her on my sins yet.' And, oh, sir! is *she* wus?"

"Better."

The old woman's explanation of her visit had frozen my own blood a little; "Mary Gear's a-going to die," had been uttered with an awful earnestness. My mother, a shade more pale, too, sat and glared at Mrs. Ray.

"She'll be wus—she'll have a relapse—I must see her to-night!"

"Impossible."

"I've come a long way on a night that few people would ventur out—I've left a winding-sheet at home—I find another here!"

"But winding-sheets, Mrs. Ray," explained my mother, who seemed well versed in those articles,

"only foretell death in the house wherein they are seen first."

"Get out!" said Mrs. Ray, "they tell the death of the one you are thinkin' the most on, and the most troubled about. That's Mary Gear to me—and she's ill and agoing to die. I'm as sure o' that, as I'm a living woman sitting here!"

"It's very wrong to sit there, saying such awful things," reproved my mother, "putting such awful things in my boy's head."

"So I couldn't rest," continued Mrs. Ray, deaf to the reproof; "I felt if death was about here, and I must not let an hour go by and not ask your wife to forgive me all my trespasses against her. I tried to think, at fust, that to-morrow would do, that it was an awful night, that I was old, and excitement was bad for me, but the wind said 'No' to it, and the rain said 'No' to it, and God Almighty said 'No' to it, I'm sure!"

She held her hand up to prevent all interruption, struggled with her breath, and then went on again:

"So I dressed and came out. I ordered the horses to be put to the carridge, and Miss Ray not to be disturbed at her peanner—and the noise she

made herself, drowned any other!—and I came away to see your wife, sir.”

“I am very sorry, Mrs. Ray, that you have put yourself to this unnecessary trouble, but——”

“But you’ll let me see her?”

“I dare not, for her health’s sake.”

“If she were to die to-night, sir!” she entreated.

“I do not think that there is any fear,” I replied; “she has been mercifully spared to me, and I entertain great hopes of seeing her well and strong again.”

“Mr. Gear,” she affirmed, with a persistency that was terribly depressing, “it’s the snuff of the candle only brightening up a bit. She’ll die, *she’ll die*, I tell you!”

“I will pray not.”

“And I must see her. I must whisper to her that I did her harm once, that I planned harm against her, and built upon her death and money. Oh! I must tell her that.”

“I pledge you my word that she will forgive you, Mrs. Ray.”

“It’s a weight upon an old woman’s soul, and only she can lift it off me. You’re a man who won’t be hard upon me, in this late hour, when I’ve better thoughts?”

"In a few days you may see her."

"Too late!" she affirmed; "I've dreamed all that's coming—I've seen her dead face in my sleep—it's not only the winding-sheet that's brought me here."

She continued to plead her cause—I to remain deaf to it. This old woman's excitement was deep and intense, and must arouse Mary's. There was danger to my wife, and I was her guardian to protect her from it.

My mother also began to reason with Mrs. Ray on the impolicy of the step, and the old woman listened, and stared at the candle still. After a while, the listener said, with a half-groan:

"Well, if it must be—if you can be so hard against me—I give up. If I were Janet, I'd fight my way, praps, but I'm old and very weak."

She began to shake with cold, and to beat again her hands upon the table.

"I should like some brandy," she murmured, "if it's to be got."

The brandy was in Jabez's back room, and Jabez was still outside—possibly in the carriage with the coachman, discussing Mrs. Ray's eccentricities. I went out of the room in search of the maid or, failing the maid, to help myself to the

Cognac; I had been absent two minutes, when a loud scream from my mother startled me, and made me rush back to the room I had quitted.

My mother was gasping with fright and wringing her hands.

"She's gone upstairs—she darted up and ran before I could stop her. Oh! my dear boy, what will be the end of this?"

I hurried away, and ran upstairs into my wife's room. Mrs. Ray had reached the bedside, and her limbs giving way with her, had dropped her stick, and flung herself forward, catching at the coverlet with outstretched hands.

"Mary Gear—Mary Zitman," she cried, "speak to me. Tell him—tell him I'm not to go away yet!"

My wife opened her eyes, and half-turned on her side to look down upon the crouching woman. To my surprise, the sudden waking, the sudden presence of Mrs. Ray there, did not appear to alarm her, although a consciousness of the strangeness of the scene appeared to be slowly impressing itself upon her.

"What is it, Canute?" she whispered.

"Nothing—nothing. Mrs. Ray has come to

see you, Mary. That's all—you will not feel alarmed."

"I was dreaming of her, I think—I am not alarmed, dear."

"Tell him, I'm not to go away," screamed Mrs. Ray, "or he'll snatch me up in his arms and carry me down stairs. Tell him I'm to stop here!"

"You must not," I muttered, making a step towards her.

"I'll scream," warned Mrs. Ray, tightening her clasp of the coverlet; "I'll scream my loudest, if you dare to touch me."

"Let her stop," pleaded Mary; "it is kind of her to wish to see me, Canute, and I am strong enough to bear with her."

"But——"

"Leet her bide," said Janet's voice at my side; "what she ha' got to sae may na trooble the lassie. If there's any harm, it's doon by the bad watch ye twa hae kep."

Janet glanced from me to my mother, standing silent and trembling in the doorway.

"I have come, Mary Zitman," murmured Mrs. Ray, still in the same posture, and bestowing on my wife the old and more familiar title, "I've come before death parts you and me—sooner than

either on us thinks, perhaps—to ask your forgiveness for past sin. I wished you dead once—and I—I tried to kill you!”

“No—no,” answered Mary.

“You had my brother’s money, and I had a miser’s love for it. It seemed my right, and I was poor and wretched. I—I prayed every night that you might die, and leave me rich, when I thought you would not marry agin. It was the one prayer that I taught myself.”

“Forgiven!” said my wife.

Mrs. Ray’s excitement was on the increase, and I could see my wife was anxious to abridge the interview, although fearful of an abrupt termination thereto. Janet, with folded arms, stood by my side, intensely watchful.

“James Baines—your brother’s man—and I had a long talk together at last—in the very room downstairs I’ve run away from. God forgive me! but—but I promised him a thousand pounds when you were dead, knowing he was a villain who never studied life much. I tempted him, and he watched you—plotted against your life—opened your winder, when you were sleeping, that God’s air might turn murderer against you, too—he was my tool, and he worked on in the dark.”

Mary closed her eyes—I could see the red blood mantling her face and neck.

“Janet,” I whispered, “this must cease now.”

“It’s a’ doon—the warst be out,” muttered Janet.

“You don’t say, ‘Forgiven,’ unto that!” Mrs. Ray screamed, with a vehemence that alarmed us all. “You’re going to die, and leave me accursed. Oh, Mary Zitman! that’ll be on earth and in heaven, too—and I’m sorry for the past—I’d die—to—wipe it—all—away!”

“Forgiven,” whispered my wife, opening her eyes again. “The past is over—Canute and I have outlived it, and are happy in forgetting it. My poor misguided woman, I pray that God will forgive you, as I do.”

“As you do!” she cried, seizing Mary’s hand, and then dropping it, and falling forward suddenly. “As—YOU—do!”

There was a long silence, broken by Janet making two strides towards Mrs. Ray, leaning over, and then lifting her up in her arms.

“Lie doon, Mary moine, and dinna think ony mair o’ this,” said she. “She hae fainted, as I kenned she wud lang since. I’ll carry her doon,

and gie her some coold water. Mrs. Gear, wull ye stay and sooth the lassie—Mister Canute, I'm thinking ye'd better coom doon a minit and help me."

She bore Mrs. Ray into her own room, in lieu of descending the stairs. She had placed her on the bed, and was standing on the landing waiting for me, ere my lingering steps had brought me from the room.

"Close that door," she said to me.

I closed the room door, and Janet laid her hand upon my arm.

"Ye can bear a shock—but it's awfu' sudden-like. We maun keep it frae the lassie, for a weel."

"Keep what?" I exclaimed.

"She came just in time—Lord be gude to her!" said Janet, not answering my question. "She's dead!"

CHAPTER XII.

MARY'S SUSPICION.

WE kept the secret of Mrs. Ray's death from Mary. Her sudden presence at my wife's bedside, and the revelation she had made there, had been sufficient shock for Mary to stand up against. There was no need to tell her all that had happened afterwards—there was no good to follow it.

She came *just in time*, as Janet had said. The secret had lain heavy with her; she had long struggled with it; more than once it had hovered on her lips in the days of that affluence which she had inherited by my marriage. With less to covet, the grievous sin that had led her to grudge the life of her brother's widow had tormented her; her

desire for Mary's respect or friendship had induced her to seek us out in our home at Borrowdale, and tempt us once more to Nettlewood.

Mary knew nothing of the death following swiftly on Mrs. Ray's confession—of the surprise and horror of the daughter, who betrayed more regret and love than might have been anticipated—of the inquest, and the stately funeral *cortège* which bore the old woman's body to Henlock, and left Letty Ray alone and unprotected in the great house I had planned,

Fortunately, Mary suffered no relapse, though the shock of Mrs. Ray's revelation possibly retarded her progress to convalescence; for a day or two she appeared to pause and make no further advance in health; then signs of amendment were evident once more, and day after day witnessed in her some new change for which I was ever grateful.

She gained strength, although care attacked her by the way and strove to keep it back. Thought, deep and besetting, which had no mercy on her, but sowed lines in her fair white forehead, and gave a new character to her countenance. The past would not go back, that past which verged on

the present, least of all. There was an embarrassment in her manner towards me; at times a chance word would bring back the scene in the room beneath her own, and she would glance at me with a look half of timidity, half of alarm, which made my heart sick.

For there were times when I believed her old implicit trust could never return—that beneath an affection which would not be likely to diminish, lay a fear that I might cease to love her, or once again, with harsh vehemence, demand an explanation of all that was mysterious to me. When we went down-stairs for the first time, my arm supporting her, I felt her tremble and pause on the threshold of the room where I had charged her with deceiving me.

“This room?” she said, in a low voice,

“For a little while, dear, till you are strong enough to go back to Borrowdale.”

“Ah! that dear old home!—how glad I shall be to see it again. There is not one bitter thought connected with it yet.”

“Yet, Mary!” I said, half reproachfully, “there shall be no bitter thought to dim its brightness hereafter.”

“I hope not,” she murmured, still doubtful.

"Over our marriage felicity has burst one storm—the first and the last; say the author of that is forgiven, dearest, and trust in him ever for the sunshine to follow."

"You are all that is kind and forbearing, but—the *past*!"

"We shall live it down!"

"We cannot—it is beyond our power. Closer and closer to us every day it comes. Canute, there is no resisting it."

I turned the conversation; in the early days she must not brood over the unalterable. When she was stronger, there would come fresh pursuits—I prayed fresh ties. I spoke that evening of the home at Borrowdale, read her a letter from Mr. Sanderson, concerning the care he took of it, counted the days between the present and our return, and brought my mother also to the rescue.

I was bright and cheerful in her presence—beyond it, I was becoming more grave and stern with every day. I was inactive, and Ellen was away; Ellen, whom I might rescue, if chance—or something greater than chance—threw her once more in my path. On my stern musings, Mary would, at times, as she grew stronger, suddenly in-

trude, and then it became her turn to draw me from the groove in which my dark thoughts ran. So we were both altering—perhaps both aging. After all, I thought, at times, a little morbidly, was it impossible that man and wife might become estranged by this cruel divergence of thought—that as the days and months rolled on, and these thoughts grew upon us, might not the forbidden ground on which we dared not intrench, set us still more apart? We were not *one*; she had her secret from me; I was perplexed concerning Ellen, and could not see her figure looming mid the darkness wherein she had vanished so completely.

These thoughts, or some such thoughts, were distressing my wife, I felt assured, when she seemed strong and well again a month after Mrs. Ray's death; when Janet, with many injunctions to be careful, and not think too much, had returned to Nettlewood House; when Mrs. Ray's death had been reported to her. When my mother had gone away to Borrowdale to prepare our home for our reception, the thought was heaviest, and would have borne her down again, had she not by an effort faced it, and feared less the past than losing me.

I was sitting at the table in the room where we

had quarrelled—if quarrelling it can be called—turning listlessly over the numerous sketches with which my portfolio was filled. It was evening, and Mary was absent—only that day, my mother had left for Borrowdale. Suddenly, at my feet, Mary was sitting looking up at my face. She had entered noiselessly, and had glided into that position, crossing her hands upon my knees.

“Canute, dear, that has grown a very grave face lately.”

“No, Mary. I will not own that.”

“It is not the face of the man who wooed and won me,” she said sadly, “there will never come again, the old frank, fearless looks to it.”

“I am only fearing for Ellen, Mary—not for our future happiness.”

“Oh, Canute,” with an impulsive outburst that alarmed me, “we shall never be happy again—not truly happy, as in the dear old days.”

“Where there is much perplexity, dearest, there can never be content. But I am looking forward—building on the future.”

“What do you see there?”

“The child I nursed upon my knee, and whose absence breaks her mother’s heart. The child who, however wilful was never hard to turn by the

right word, from the wrong road. A child with a heart full of love for those who loved her. She will come back to us.

"Never!"

Her hands were clasped upon my knee still, but her gaze, upturned to me, was trebled in its intensity of earnestness. Her face was full of fear, and yet of something more than fear—of a courage to face all, in the new impulse that had brought her to my side.

"Never, Mary?" I exclaimed, chilled by her emphatic response.

"Canute," she said, earnestly, "I have made up my mind to face the past, rather than lose you. I cannot set against my fear of *him*, my love for *him*, your love, and God's anger at my silence. I have struggled so hard to keep my own suspicions back, to see with you in the future some brightness, to believe that all is well—will work well—and that I am only a foolish woman weighed down by wicked thoughts. But I—I MUST tell you!"

"Well, it is best."

"I have been thinking much of Mrs. Ray, of her struggle with the past, too—of her confession to what foul depths a love of money can drive one

covetous and cruel. Oh, that money ! on all my life its shadow has fallen on me—never more dark and dense than now ! Canute,”—clasping my hands in hers—“ will you bear with me?—for my sake, will you keep my secret till the truth is revealed, or my fears are proved but the follies of a demented woman.”

I drew her from her crouching posture to my arms, to shield her there against the past so close upon her then.

“ Courage, Mary—we have a right to share each other’s secrets and cares—we shall be stronger by these confidences I have not sought, but which, shut from, have made me more wretched than I dared to own to you. But—but what has Ellen to do with all this ?—why steps she in between the past and you ? When we meet her——”

Her arms tightened round my neck, and her eyes looked into mine—eyes full of horror that transfixed my soul.

“ We may meet her in heaven, Canute, if God is good to us,” she said slowly ; “ we can meet her nowhere else ! ”

END OF VOL. II.

(7)



